DOCTOR WHO™

SHORT TRIPS: THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

KEITH R A DECANDIDO

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A Short-Story Anthology

Edited by Keith R A DeCandido

Based on a concept by John S Drew

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The Slave War © Una McCormack

Goths and Robbers © Diane Duane

Good Queen, Bad Queen, I Queen, You Queen © Terri Osborne

The Price of Conviction © Richard C White

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Dedicated to the memory of Pierce Askegren,

who was all set to contribute a story to this anthology

before his tragic death in late 2006. Rest in peace, big guy...

Introduction

Keith RA DeCandido

John will tell you that it's my fault, but it's really his.

Okay, maybe it's my fault if you trace it all the way back...

I've been a fan of *Doctor Who* since the age of eight. One Saturday morning, I was flipping around the black-and-white television my parents let me keep in my room, when lo and behold, I found this cool British show. The episode showing was *Horror of Fang Rock*, and I had no idea who any of these people were, but I adored it. After watching several more episodes, I was hooked.

Fast-forward to high school, when I become best friends with John S Drew. Among other things, we bond over our mutual love of *Star Trek*. I also tell him about this other science fiction show from England, *Doctor Who*. John is sceptical as to its quality.

'Trust me,' I said. 'You'll love it.'

Eventually, he gave it a go, and he got hooked as fast as I did.

Neither of us imagined back in high school that we'd grow up to work professionally with either *Trek* or *Who*, but we both have. On the Who side, I wrote a *Decalog* story waybackwhen, and John and I have both taken a few *Short Trips*.

Then one day, John called me with a crazy idea.

'Trust me,' he said. 'You'll love it.'

And I got hooked on his idea even faster than he got hooked on *Who*:

an anthology consisting of stories where the Doctor encounters leaders

from throughout history, time and space.

I recruited a bunch of authors, most of whom had never written *Who*

professionally before, some of whom had never written anything

professionally before, and a couple others of whom are popular writers

who've been fans of the show forever. (I'm stunned that it took this long

for Peter David or Diane Duane to write *Who*, and I'm thrilled that I got to

be the one to get them to do it.)

What follows are mostly stories about leaders from Earth — because

the Doctor just can't stay away from that blue ball for long — but other

places get their moment in the sun, too. You'll see the Roman Emperor

Theodoric, as well as rebels against Rome: Spartacus, Calpurnia, and

Queen Boudicca. You'll encounter King Arthur and Plato as you've likely

never seen them before, meet Martin Luther and King Henry VIII in the

midst of their rewriting of Europe's religious landscape, and see a side of

William Wallace you probably didn't expect. You'll travel to such exotic

worlds as Zalezna and Rishik and Mitidiki, and arrive at a deceptively

mundane American department store.

Leadership comes in many forms; some are unexpected; some are less pleasant than you'd think; and some aren't quite what history would later paint them to be. All of them, though, make for good stories. Here, we have a dozen of them.

1

Trust me. You'll love it.

2

From Little Acorns...

John S Drew

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

Lycon stepped out of the King's chambers, a solemn expression on his face. He knew he had to face a slew of reporters and well-wishers who awaited his news at the end of the hall, but there was a task that weighed even heavier on his heart. He turned slightly towards a corridor to the side and pursed his lips, letting out a short sigh. He could hear the sounds of children at play coming from a room at the end of the corridor.

He closed his eyes and steeled himself for what lay before him.

He walked down the corridor, the lighting in the area being adjusted as sensors detected his presence and the appropriate illumination was produced. Lycon could not help but smirk at the sight of the candles bursting to life as he approached. King Mihal insisted on falling back

on

more traditional appearances for the castle and its inhabitants, such as candles that appeared to be wax but were electronic in nature.

Lycon stopped and gave the doors to the chamber where the children were playing a heavy push. This was another of Mihal's requirements —

manual rather than automatic doors. It was sometimes troublesome, as the children constantly slammed them during play.

The children in question were at the moment racing around an imaginary castle of their own, brandishing swords and letting out whooping war cries. They stopped at the sight of Lycon and his rather clearly depressed expression. The eldest of the four, a boy named Kieran, stepped up to him and bowed politely.

'Is there news, sir?' he asked in a tone that feared the answer.

With a sigh and nod, Lycon said, 'It is not good. The physicians have been with him for over two hours now.'

Judai, a girl of ten, scoffed with a pass of her hand and a sneer.

'They've pronounced him dead before. He'll pull though. He's a tough old

man.'

Lycon repressed the desire to chuckle. Judai, out of all Mihal's grandchildren, reminded Lycon of the King. She was brash, outspoken, but quick to come to the aid of anyone who requested it. Instead, he said

harshly, 'You will speak of the King with a tone of respect, young lady.'

He never took a bride in all his years of service to the King, but he saw

how Mihal and Mihal's sons and daughters raised their children and took

his cue from them.

Judai lowered her eyes in deference. 'Yes, Lycon. Sorry.'

Lycon saw that she meant it and knew not to pursue the matter any

further. His expression and tone changed as he continued. 'The

physicians feel that there are but a few hours left to the King. You will be

given the opportunity to see him one more time.'

'Is he in pain?' Davad asked quietly. The younger boy of seven was

always the most concerned about the well-being of others. Early tests on

the child indicated that he was destined for the medical arts.

'He rests comfortably,' Lycon assured him. He gestured for the four to

come closer and waited until they were seated on the floor in front of him

before he continued. 'There is another matter which I feel I must confide

in you. While most of the King's people have offered their prayers and

well-wishes for a speedy recovery, there is a contingent who would

sooner have the King dead and prey upon the vacuum of power that

follows, no matter how brief a period that might be.'

'You mean someone may try to take control of the castle?' Shaila

asked, her eyes opening wide at the thought.

Lycon nodded. 'Yes, it has been known to happen. It is why your parents are not here at the moment. There have been at least two attempts within the last week to take the Kingdom. Your parents are working to make sure it never happens.'

'But I thought everyone loves our grandfather,' Davad said.

'Everyone you know of,' Lycon replied, taking a seat by a window. 'Or that you think you know. There was a time your father learned that lesson — the hard way.'

'When his uncle, Kalem, killed our great-grandfather?' Judai asked.

'Indeed,' Lycon nodded. He felt his eyes misting at the memory. 'Loran, like your grandfather, was a good man, whose only concern was the good of the people. But there were those who were more concerned about themselves, such as Kalem,' his voice faltered slightly in embarrassment, 'and at one time, Mihal.'

Judai's eyes flashed in anger. 'You lie, Lycon! You just said my grandfather was a good man!'

'Mind your place, child.' Lycon again spoke sharply. 'He was — is — a good man. But there was a time when he was only concerned for himself, a time before he became king. Your grandfather, the only son of Loran, was thrust onto the throne rather abruptly, and without so much as a by-your- leave, he was forced to take control of the planet, something he never had a desire for.'

'Really?' the children all chimed in unison.

'I don't see why,' Judai said. 'It would be a great honour. Plus, you'd have all that control over what was going on.'

'Such power is a double-edged sword,' Lycon said. He gauged the expressions on the young people's faces and then stared at the entrance to the room. He could hear the frustrated mutters coming from the waiting reporters at the end of the hall. The choice between dealing with them or with the children was difficult, but he knew where his duty lay.

'You've never been told this story, but I feel that you should. Mihal has placed a provision in the royal charter that allows for an elder female to take the throne. Judai, as the eldest of the grandchildren, this would place you before the others in the line of succession.'

Kieran snorted. 'Fine with me. I don't want to be king anyway.'

'That's just the attitude Mihal once had,' Lycon said, smiling. 'But he didn't have a choice in the matter.'

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'But if he didn't want to do it, how did he become such a great king?' Shaila asked.

'Time,' Lycon replied simply. 'It is a great teacher.' His face softened as a memory played across his mind. 'And there was something else, a wise man.'

'A Wise Man? I thought you were Mihal's Wise Man,' Davad said.

'I am, but this man's wisdom outshone mine. He came among us for such a short while. Your grandfather wanted him to stay, but there was always something about him, even from the first moment I laid eyes on him, that told me he was meant to move on and help others.'

'Who was he?' Judai asked.

'He called himself the Doctor.'

It was an early harvest morning, and Mihal had decided that we would take a couple of steeds out into the northern woods to do a little stripe hunting. I was your grandfather's tutor at the time. We became close friends very quickly. I still remember what a strong, handsome man he was. His face was covered in an enviable beard of lush red hair. His blue eyes could melt the heart of many a lady, and a few men, were he so inclined. Always, was he decked out in the finest clothing; his appearance was of the utmost importance to him.

Many mistook Mihal's ways as that of simple vanity, including his father. What they never understood was that this was his way of showing his control over everything in his life. He had, and still does to this day, a deep-rooted fear of losing control. It was why he was so reluctant to take the throne from his father. And he thought he didn't have to worry about it for a long time as his father was in excellent health. But life isn't what

you

always plan it to be.

Fate would play its hand that day as Mihal's steed broke down about

halfway to the woods. Being as he never paid attention to any of his

studies, he was having difficulty getting it to start. I offered to help, but he

refused to accept it. He was always determined to do things on his own.

It was only after a near hour of frustrating examination and banging of

the chassis of the steed did he turn to me and ask my opinion.

'I just had this thing serviced,' he said. 'When I get back to the castle,

I shall have a few choice words with the technician.'

I knew he would do no such thing. Mihal hated confrontation. He

never even told his father about his desire to leave the capital city and

take his studies elsewhere. As I worked on the steed, I questioned him

on that very subject.

Mihal was now lying in the grass, staring up into the sky and smiling

as though he had discovered something entirely new among the clouds.

He sighed as he pulled a piece of fruit from his sack. 'Must I tell him

anything?'

'Well,' I said, 'you owe him that much.'

'I owe him my love as his son and my loyalty as his faithful servant.'

I removed myself from inside the inner workings of the metallic beast

and wiped the sweat from my face. 'I'm sure telling him of your desire falls somewhere in that purview. I cannot understand why this is not working. Diagnostics show it to be functional.'

Mihal shrugged and rose from the ground. 'It doesn't matter. We're not far from the hunting grounds. Let's go by foot.'

'It is a pity,' I said to him.

'What?'

'With your gentle nature and your easy-going way, you'd make an excellent ruler.' I smiled at him, knowing how he was going to react.

Mihal simply moaned and gestured towards the woods. 'Come on.'

We walked towards the forest; our conversation was light for the rest of the journey. Little did we know that Mihal's uncle Kalem, who was always jealous of his brother and felt Loran was a weak ruler, was scheming for the throne. Kalem had the ears of a number of others who felt the same and thus he was able to stir up rebellion. As we made our way towards the northern forest, Kalem and his followers attacked the castle.

You have heard the stories of your great-grandfather and how bravely he and his loyal soldiers defended the castle. In the end, they succumbed to the superior forces. Kalem and Loran fought in Loran's chambers, with neither giving quarter to the other in their struggle. They fought with traditional weapons forged from metal rather than our modern

surge sticks. Loran fell to Kalem's sword, but not before he swore that

Kalem's reign would be short. The remaining guard pledged their fealty

to Kalem more out of fear than any loyalty to the man.

Kalem immediately set himself up with a proclamation to the Kingdom

that his rule was absolute and he would brook no insolence. He

discovered where Mihal and I had gone and headed out into the woods

with a small hunting party, despite the objections of his advisers.

Thanks to our spending so much time on the broken steed, they

made it to the woods before we did. Frustrated, Kalem ordered his troops

to spread out and find us. As Mihal and I approached the edge of the

woods, a lone eager soldier of Kalem's decided to take advantage of the

situation and opened fire. Thankfully, he was a poor shot.

We dived for cover behind a large boulder. He was using a high-

powered staser rifle, while all we had were our crossbows. Fortunately,

while they lacked the energy the rifle had, they still packed quite a punch.

Mihal silently gestured for me to fire at the higher branches of the tree

the soldier stood under. We opened fire, cutting the tree at the halfway

point. The poor man never had a chance as the timber crashed down

upon him. Mihal was the first out from behind the rock, picking up the

rifle. 'What is this all about?' he asked.

I didn't need to answer as a voice called out from the distance. ‘Torg?

What's wrong? Did you get them?'

We both recognised the voice. It was Dirge, Kalem's right-hand man.

Mihal gripped the butt of the rifle in anger and muttered, 'Treachery. They

mean to kill us and take the throne.'

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I couldn't stop myself from saying, 'They may have already done so.'

Mihal turned an angry eye towards me. 'My father would never give up

without a fight. Would not give in unless...'

He raised the rifle and stormed off into the woods.

‘Mihal!' I tried to stop him, but he shrugged off my hand on his

shoulder.

'I will kill him!'

We didn't get very far into the woods when we heard the sounds of

several rifles powering up. A low chuckle brought a shiver up my back as

Kalem stepped into the clearing.

‘Mihal,' he said, voice dripping with confidence, 'how nice to see you.'

'My father?' Mihal only said.

Kalem chuckled. 'He fought the good fight — for once.'

Mihal took a step forward, but halted his advance as a rifle blast

struck the ground before him.

'What now?' I asked. 'You simply kill us like a pair of dogs?'

'More like sheep,' Kalem replied. 'Your father was a weak, feckless ruler.' He pointed a finger at Mihal. 'You are clearly his son. To think that you would have inherited the throne.'

I can still see the look in Kalem's eyes and he lifted his hand to signal his soldiers' weapons to the ready. It was the look of an animal. My thoughts at that moment were of the people of our world. How would they fare with such a creature in power?

Kalem never got to utter his next command. The air grew turbulent and the foliage of the forest rose up and swirled around us. The sound of groaning engines assaulted our ears. The soldiers looked about in panic, trying to pinpoint the source of the calamity.

It didn't take long as we watched a tall, blue box — the best word I can use is materialise — materialise before us. A light flashed atop it, coming to a halt as the sound cut out.

Kalem didn't know what to make of this manifestation, but his soldiers were quick to turn their weapons on the box and open fire. The energy being released bounced harmlessly off its surface.

'Stop firing you fools!' Kalem shouted.

Kalem stepped up to the box and ran his hand across the surface. He immediately pulled it away in shock.

'The surface is cool,' I heard him mutter.

We took advantage of the situation. Turning to our right, Mihal and I

pushed through two of the soldiers, knocking them to the ground.

I could hear Kalem's frustration in the distance as we made our way deeper into the forest. 'Get after them!'

There is something to the adage of fighting an enemy on your home soil. Mihal and I quickly found ourselves near a brook which featured several sink holes. Having played in this area at great length during our childhood, we were familiar with the terrain. All we needed were a couple of Kalem's men to approach and the land would take care of us.

The first two who fell gave the alarm to the others with their cries of

panic. The remaining soldiers who entered the area were much more cautious. Still, we needed something more if we were to get out of the woods alive.

I watched as several pairs of feet walked past my covered position under an old tree that lay horizontal with the earth. I was surprised when Mihal suddenly appeared beside me. He was good at stealth and had always excelled at such things when we engaged in military play as children.

'I do not see Kalem,' he whispered.

'He is probably to the rear somewhere, letting his men do the dirty work,' I replied.

Mihal shook his head. ‘No, he wouldn't do that. He wants to make

sure he's there when I'm killed. He couldn't care less if he administers it,

but he wants to witness my death. That's why he's out here: his

arrogance.' A grin crossed Mihal's lips. 'We can use that to our

advantage.'

'There are so many of them,' I said. 'Their steeds are not far from

here. Perhaps if we were to make our way there and back to the castle,

we could try to regain the throne.'

Mihal said. 'We can't tell who is loyal to us and who now sides with

Kalem. We need to cut the head of this serpent here and now before we

try taking anything back.'

I could feel his body go rigid at the sight of Kalem entering the area.

The look on his uncle's face was one of frustration, but there was

something else — fear. Mihal slowly backed out from under the tree

before I could stop him.

He remained crouched behind the lumber as he waited for Kalem to

approach. With a roar he launched himself at his enemy. The two came

down in a tumble, weapons flying away from both of them.

Kalem was the first on his feet, bringing a kick to Mihal's stomach,

sending the young prince rolling over in pain. I came out from our hiding

place, but was immediately stopped by several soldiers. Kalem gestured

for them to hold their fire.

'I shall deal with this,' he said, the animal gleam in his eye becoming even more pronounced. 'It seems fitting that I kill this whelp with my bare hands.' He leaned down and grabbed Mihal, pulling him up with both hands around the prince's throat.

Mihal responded by pounding fisted hands under Kalem's ribs. The blow shocked Kalem, and he stumbled backward. Mihal followed this up with a flying kick to Kalem's stomach. The impact sent Kalem to the ground. Mihal immediately reached for the nearby weapon and trained it on his opponent.

'Yield!' Mihal growled.

Kalem coughed, clearly in pain. He sat up and chuckled. 'You yield,' he said, pointing towards me as I had several weapons trained on me. 'Yield or he dies.'

'Don't do it!' I blurted. I could see the look in Mihal's eyes. He wasn't

about to let them harm me.

'What will happen if I release you?' he asked, his voice quavering and the weapon in his hand shaking.

'Who knows what life holds?' Kalem replied. 'But I can tell you this — Lycon will die if you pull that trigger. That is a certainty.'

'Don't!' I urged. 'There is more at stake than me!'

'I know,' Mihal said, lowering his weapon.

Kalem immediately got to his feet and snatched the weapon from

Mihal's hands. Kalem pointed it at his head.

You never really know what death is going to be like until the moment

it is upon you. At that moment, I genuinely thought I was going to die. I

could hear the soldiers' weapons power up as they prepared to fire.

'Excuse me...'

The voice was rich and warm and somewhat mischievous in tone. We

all turned in surprise as a man entered the clearing. His clothing was

most unusual for someone out in the woods. He looked more like a

member of the royal court, dressed in a fancy frock coat and a pair of

trousers a shade of green darker than the leaves in the trees. His air was

one of humility, but I could sense that was a ruse.

'I'm sorry,' he said simply. 'I don't mean to interrupt, but I couldn't help

noticing the odds in this situation.'

'Speak fast,' Kalem barked. 'Are you a man of the King?'

The man looked somewhat puzzled at the question. 'I can't answer

that as I don't know where I am. I seem to have managed to misread my

instrumentation and thought I was somewhere near the Great Pavilion,

but I'm sure this is not the case.'

'Silence!' Kalem roared. He gestured to one of his guards. 'Watch

him!'

The stranger smirked slightly as the guard turned a weapon on him. His smirk turned to surprise as he stared at the barrel of the rifle. 'Is that an electromagnetic weapon?' He gestured to the soldier. 'May I see it?'

'Enough!' Kalem was clearly reaching boiling point. 'Another word from you and you are dead, whoever you are. We have much more important business to deal with.'

'Of course,' the man said, reaching into his pocket. 'I wouldn't want to interrupt the course of events here.' He pulled out a long, cylindrical device. 'I only asked about your weapons as I thought perhaps they might be susceptible to this.'

The strange man lifted the device into the air and pushed a small button. A sharp whine filled the air a moment. The soldier fired his weapon, but stopped in surprise as nothing happened. The others attempted to do the same with similar results.

'What?' Kalem sputtered.

'This is Zalezna!' the man exclaimed in surprise. 'I really am some distance from the Pavilion.' He saw the look of shock in Kalem's face. 'Your weapons have a flaw in them. The metal used in its construction — and in most of the metal on this world — is susceptible to sonic

vibrations. It's why there is a sound dampener in the barrel, so as not to cause it to lock up. My sonic screwdriver was set at a higher level than

the dampener could compensate for.'

Mihal and I once again took advantage of the distraction, but rather than escape we attacked our captors. Mihal threw himself at two of the soldiers, while I faced off against the remaining three. While they had the numbers, we had the skill at hand-to-hand combat, and it wasn't long before we had defeated them.

Mihal stood over their prone forms in triumph, looking around in frustration. 'Where is Kalem?'

Our answer came with the sound of a steed powering up in the distance. Several small explosions followed it.

We raced to the sound of the disturbance to find Kalem riding off towards the castle. The remaining steeds lay in smoking ruins at our feet.

'Stranger,' Mihal turned to the man, 'I thank you for all you have done, and if I could but ask one more favour...'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid he's out of range for my screwdriver.'

'Then all is lost,' Mihal said. 'He'll reach the castle first and the throne will be his.'

'Why is that?' the stranger asked. 'Wait. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I am known as the Doctor.'

I stepped forward and shook the Doctor's hand. 'And I too thank you for all you have done. I am Lycon and this is Prince Mihal.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'Prince Mihal.' He bowed. 'Your Majesty.'

'No more,' Mihal replied. 'Once Kalem reaches the castle, he will have the throne. All is lost.'

'Lost? Surely not. You are still the prince. You must hold some sway. Your people...'

'My people,' Mihal said, a hint of disgust in his voice. 'They are not my people. They never were and they never will be. If only my father were here, he would know what to do.'

'Well, if it's getting to the castle first that concerns you,' the Doctor offered, 'I think I can accommodate you there.'

Without saying another word, he turned and walked off. We followed after him, more from curiosity than out of any idea that there was hope. I could hear Mihal's snort of scorn as we approached the tall, blue box.

'You can accommodate us with this?' Mihal asked sceptically.

The Doctor pulled a key from his pocket and placed it in the lock of the door. 'Why, yes.' He opened the door with a flourish. 'Your Majesty.'

Mihal laughed as he stepped through the threshold of the box. The laugh immediately ceased and his eyes opened wide. Indeed, I had a look of surprise as well.

It was as if we had stepped into a new world and yet, one that was strangely familiar to us. There was a room beyond the door, one that was infinitely larger than the dimensions of the box would lead one to believe.

The ceiling itself, if one could call the roof of this room a ceiling,

stretched far above the height of the box. Rows and rows of old tomes

lined shelves of antique bookcases covering most of the walls.

I ran a hand along the intricately designed railing that lined the stairs leading down into the room. Yes, there was a staircase leading downward. This room truly was a marvel. I gasped as I saw a door on the opposite side of this chamber. It was ajar and I could make out a corridor that went beyond, suggesting there was even more to this fantastic world than what lay before us.

But the most impressive sight of all was the control panel situated in the centre of the chamber. It featured a number of intricate workings that

were blinking and clicking even as we approached. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn the machine was alive.

The Doctor stepped up to the control panel and began to stab at a number of buttons and pull at several levers.

'Right,' he said, 'short explanations. This craft is called the TARDIS, which stands for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space.'

'A time craft?' Mihal exclaimed. 'Then you can take us back to the point where my father was killed.'

'I can't,' the Doctor answered quickly, but firmly. 'Those events have happened. We cannot do anything to change them.'

Mihal started, his voice faltering, 'I was hoping to avoid this.' 'You do not wish to fight?'

'That is not it,' Mihal replied. 'I am more than willing to take on Kalem.

I wish to deal the death blow before he even gets the chance to enter my

father's chamber.'

'Then I don't understand,' the Doctor said, clearly confused. 'You must

excuse, Mihal,' I started to explain.

'Enough!' Mihal ordered. 'Doctor, if you would please escort us to the

castle. We shall secure the troops and regain the throne for the people.'

The Doctor didn't say another word, but I could sense he was

beginning to understand what was happening. He nodded and turned to

his control panel. 'I shall need to know a little bit about the castle. Where

is a good place to set us down?'

He pulled another lever and the ceiling above us lit up as a detailed

layout of the castle flashed across the surface.

'Amazing,' I muttered in astonishment.

Mihal looked the map over and pointed in the direction of the meeting

hall. 'I think this is where many of the soldiers will have gathered. I would

imagine that they reluctantly agreed to obey Kalem once he killed my

father.'

'You hope,' the Doctor said, 'that they did it reluctantly.'

'I do not run from fights, Doctor. I intend to let them know that I am

now their king and not that usurper, Kalem.'

The Doctor bowed slightly and smiled. 'As you wish, Your Majesty.'

A column of bright light began to rise and fall slowly from the centre of

the controls as the chamber filled with the sound of the engine we heard

earlier. To me, it sounded like this TARDIS was crying out to the cosmos:

Beware, I am on the move.

11

The journey did not take long, not that I was aware of time while I was

within the confines of the craft. I watched the face of Mihal as we

travelled. Each second that passed seemed to wear on him as if he knew

we were moving towards a destiny he didn't want to confront.

When the flight ended, the column stopped moving and a soft chime

rang out. The Doctor pulled down a small viewing box that hung

suspended from the ceiling. He touched a few more buttons on his

control panel and the box lit up with a scene of the meeting hall outside

the TARDIS.

The soldiers had their guard down. This was the centre of life at the

castle. Here, the soldiers feasted, caroused, and generally had a good

time at their king's expense. Even now, with the change of situation, they

still relaxed within the chamber. The appearance of the TARDIS startled

them somewhat. Several of the guards approached the blue box and

started tapping the surface.

'So what do you think of the situation outside, Your Majesty?' the Doctor asked.

'Huh?' Mihal looked up, clearly distracted from his deep thoughts. He stepped up to the view box and smiled. 'Many of those in that room were loyal to my father. They have families, though, and if they saw that the situation in the court had changed, they would have offered their fealty to Kalem.'

'And if you were to step out from a tall, blue box that had just magically appeared in the room?' the Doctor asked.

'I believe they would take up the sword for me.'

The Doctor tapped a button on his control panel and gestured towards the door. 'The way is set then, Your Majesty.'

Mihal looked towards the door and sighed. He turned back towards the Doctor. 'This is a time machine, Doctor. Perhaps we could come back after I have had more time to mature.'

'You are not old enough to rule?' the Doctor asked, surprised.

'I am more than old enough. My family has had royalty as young as thirteen years on the throne.'

'Then I don't see the problem,' the Doctor said. I knew from his expression he was waiting for the prince to explain what he had already figured out. I am sure I wore such a look on many an occasion as I

tutored Mihal.

Mihal faltered. He looked to me and I nodded. It was easy for him to say it to me. It came out almost rehearsed. But now, in front of this stranger who had saved his life, it proved difficult. 'I am not fit to rule.' He held up his hand to stop the Doctor from answering. 'Let me rephrase that. I am not ready to rule. I have never really wanted the throne, but as the only child of the King, I have had no choice.'

The Doctor smiled knowingly. ‘Ah, I see. Heavy is the head that wears the crown.'

Mihal looked confused. 'Crown?'

The Doctor reached up and touched his head. 'Crown. You know, the

ornament you wear on your head that signifies your power.'

'The King wears nothing so garish.' I couldn't help but laugh. 'Indeed,' Mihal said. 'A simple ring of topaz signifies our right to rule.'

'I would think that it was more than that,' the Doctor says. 'All right, how about with great power comes great responsibility.'

'Yes!' Mihal snapped his fingers. 'That's exactly it! I feel I am not ready for the responsibility.'

'Many great leaders of the past were not ready for the responsibility, but when it was thrust upon them suddenly, they had no choice.'

'But I have a choice, Doctor,' Mihal said, pointing towards the control panel. 'You could take us out of here.'

‘Mihal!' I exclaimed, shocked that he would suggest this.

'I could,' the Doctor answered quickly. 'Yes, I could. But then what happens to your people, to this world? Can you walk away from it?'

'I feel they would be better off without me,' Mihal said simply.

The Doctor drummed the control panel a moment and nodded. 'I'll tell you what, Mihal. You've come this far and are confident that you can wrest control from Kalem. You know that his being in control is not something you desire for your people. Let's take care of that situation first. After this is done, make your request again.'

Mihal reached out a hand to the Doctor. 'Done.'

The Doctor took it warmly. 'Well then, shall we get on with it?'

As Mihal turned towards the door, weaponless, facing possible death, I couldn't help but take something away from the exchange between the two, something that I would carry with me to this day. Deal with your current situations and then deal with what comes next. Worrying about the future when you don't have your present affairs in order doesn't make any sense.

Mihal stepped out of the box, with myself and the Doctor following. The collective gasp that filled the meeting hall resounded off the high walls and ceiling.

'Prince Mihal!'

'It's him!'

'They told us you were dead!'

'Yes, it is I,' Mihal said, quietening the guards down. 'I have returned, alive and well. I know many of you have sworn your allegiance to Kalem, but he is not the rightful ruler. I am. And if you raise your sword in my defence and the defence of this kingdom, nothing more shall be said of this.'

The guards looked around at each other, nodded, and then knelt before Mihal, their weapons laid out on open palms.

'Our lives are yours to command, sire,' Ethnos, captain of the guard, said. He rose and placed his weapon back in its holster. 'What shall we do with Kalem? He is on his way and has ordered a welcome worthy of a king.'

Mihal smiled that mischievous smile. 'Oh, he shall receive a welcome — but one from a king.' His face fell as he turned back to Ethnos. 'My

father's body?'

'It lies in the dungeon at the moment. We awaited Kalem's order on how to dispose of it.'

Mihal nodded and stepped away. I followed after him, but he turned and held up his hand. 'No, I need a moment alone.'

I do not know what happened. I do not know what was said. I can only imagine Mihal was having that heart-to-heart talk he should have had with his father when the man was alive. Mihal owed him that

much.

Kalem rode through the drawbridge opening and into the courtyard.

He was greeted by a member of the court who helped him down from his

steed. Kalem brushed him off as he made his way directly to the meeting

hall.

The great doors swung open wide and Kalem strode in, his heavy

boots echoing through the empty chamber.

'What is this?' he roared, punctuating each word with a rise in volume.

'Where is everyone?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Mihal said, stepped out from behind the throne. 'It

only seems fitting. An empty chamber for an empty man.'

'Your Kalem spluttered. He reached for his weapon and then stopped

as he realised it had been rendered useless by the Doctor. 'What

treachery is this?'

'Treachery? Funny you should use that word, as it was the word that

was running through my head as I was fighting off your soldiers. How

quickly you cheapen the meaning of the word.'

'Where are my guards?' Kalem asked.

' *My* guards,' Mihal said. ' *My* guards. *My* throne. *My* kingdom.'

Kalem's face split into a broad smile. 'Over my dead body.'

'Just what I was thinking of,' Mihal said as he opened a case and

tossed a sword on the floor. It clanged as it slid to Kalem's feet. He

picked it up and gave a few quick strokes in the air.

'You always were a romantic,' Kalem said, 'as was your father. These eccentricities are going to be your downfall.'

'I'm old fashioned,' Mihal replied, taking up a defensive stance before his uncle. 'It's why the people of this kingdom loved my father.'

'It's what's killing this kingdom,' Kalem said. He stepped up to Mihal and raised his sword, ready to attack. ‘If we don't move forward, we shall die as a people.'

'And I suppose family and loyalty are old-fashioned concepts as well?' Mihal asked.

'Enough!' Kalem roared, lunging forward with his weapon. Mihal neatly met it, striking the blow back with his own sword. He quickly followed it up with a thrust that cut across Kalem's right arm. The pretender to the throne reeled back, clutching the wound.

'Curse you!'

‘No,' Mihal said calmly. 'Curse you.'

He pressed his attack by coming forward at Kalem with a thrust of the sword. Kalem barely managed to deflect the attack. He clumsily swashed

his sword before him, catching nothing but air. He backed away from his nephew, trying to catch his breath.

'We could share the throne,' he said weakly.

'We do not share the same idea for our world,' Mihal said, advancing

towards him. 'How could we share the throne?'

Kalem took another defensive stance for a moment before dropping his weapon, turning and running off. He ran through the door and stopped. At the sight of myself, the Doctor, and several guards waiting for him, Kalem slowly lifted his arms above his head.

'I surrender. I am at your mercy.'

Mihal stepped out into the corridor. His body tensed a moment and I could see his knuckles turning white as he gripped the sword so tightly.

He relaxed, though, and exhaled softly before speaking again. 'It is fortunate for you that I have mercy. Take him to the dungeon. Place him in the cell where he left my father to lie.'

I was confused by this pronouncement. 'Surely you will execute him, sire?'

He shook his head. No, I will not. He will have his chance to defend himself as all citizens of this world have had in the past and will continue to enjoy in the future. Take him away.'

The guards grabbed Kalem and led him off.

Mihal stepped up to the Doctor and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I thank you, Doctor, for your help in all this.'

'It was a pleasure, Your Majesty.'

Mihal's face clouded as he looked to me.

The celebrations after Mihal's immediate coronation went well into the

night. The Doctor stayed and enjoyed our company and revels. As the evening wore on, I noticed Mihal becoming more and more withdrawn.

By the time the midnight hour approached, he was nowhere in sight. The Doctor noticed his absence as well, as we both made our way to his chambers just off the meeting hall.

He was seated before a modest fire in his fireplace, a glass of wine resting loosely in his hand. He looked up at the two of us as we stood in the doorway. He gestured for us to enter.

I took a seat by Mihal as the Doctor knelt before the fire and rubbed his hands for warmth.

'I am not ready for this, Lycon,' Mihal said dully. 'We have known this for some time.'

'You have known this,' I corrected him. 'Or should I say, you have felt this. I have known no such thing. In light of your performance today, your steadfastness during the crisis, your compassion when Kalem was captured, I cannot help but feel the Kingdom is in great hands.'

'But that was this situation. What of the future? How am I to deal with the future?' He paused. 'What if Kalem is right? What if I am too old-fashioned?' He looked towards the Doctor and shook his head. 'We have always surmised that there was life on other worlds. I think it is safe to say that it exists, as the Doctor is proof of that. What if we were to

encounter other life forms in the future? Are we ready?'

'Something to definitely think about, Your Majesty,' the Doctor said,

lifting himself to his feet. 'And perhaps, in time, you may wish to consult

with Kalem about those very things, but at the present and that is what is

important, your people need a strong ruler. I agree with Lycon's

assessment. You are ready.'

'And if I should make a mistake? If I should fail?'

The Doctor nodded, placing his hands inside his pockets and slowly

circling the room. 'I have travelled a great deal, Mihal, and I have seen a

great many things — things that would amaze and scare you. They pale

in comparison to the task that lays before you.'

Mihal rose from his chair. 'You said after this was all over, you'd let

me ask you again, Doctor. Well, I'm asking, take me with you.'

The Doctor stopped his stride near a window. 'I do not doubt you

could learn a great deal travelling with me. But experience is the best

teacher.'

Mihal looked at the Doctor and nodded. 'You're right, of course. I

cannot avoid my fate. But it doesn't mean I can't worry or fear.'

'It goes with the territory.' The Doctor smiled. 'Some of history’s

greatest leaders faced such doubts in their time.'

'Really?'

'Of course,' the Doctor replied. 'Would you care to hear of some of them?'

'Yes,' Mihal said. 'Yes, I would.'

'It's getting late,' he said.

'What matters the hour to a man with a time machine?' Mihal smiled. 'Besides, I have all the time in the world now.'

The Doctor sat down in a chair opposite the two of us. He accepted the glass of wine Mihal offered and proceeded to tell his tales, starting with one that happened to him very recently...

16

One Fateful Knight

Peter David

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

i.

The woman's howls of agony echoed through the castle. Everyone from the serfs to the vassals to the odd lord or two still hanging about the building was able to hear it and shudder inwardly. Some crossed themselves. Many shook their heads in fear over the prospect of losing the poor creature to childbirth, for a woman dying in the throes of birthing was not all that unusual an occurrence. Her voice carried to the ears of the scullery maids in the kitchen and up to the highest watchtower where

two guards heard it, and one of them said to the other, 'Every day I thank

God on high that I wasn't born a woman, and it's moments like this that

spur me to do so.'

'It's more than just the nature of a woman's woes,' replied his

associate, this voice tinged with darkness. 'This birth has the stink of the

devil to it. Child's not natural, says I.'

'You're not the only one what says it,' said the first guard. Neither of

them had to go into detail about that which they already knew, the stories

that the child had been sired by a man who, as near as anyone could

determine, had died miles away at the site of a fearsome battle. There

seemed no reasonable explanation as to how he could have been in two

places at once. Theories fell into two camps. Some believed that the lady

had been unfaithful to her lord and had manufactured the story of his

visiting her that woeful evening, hoping that its sheer audacity would

carry the day. The other school of thought was that she had indeed been

taken in by some sort of sorcery that had enabled an intruder to

impersonate her husband. Neither option was a particularly palatable

one.

'Sad to say,' said the first guard, 'but if she dies this night, maybe 'tis

for the best.'

His partner scowled, but couldn't bring himself to say otherwise.

A fearsome rainstorm had been moving in for much of the evening,

and it chose now to unleash its might upon the castle. The clouds, black

with wrath, pelted down furiously upon the structure as lightning crackled

against them. Typically when lightning flashed, the sound of its thunder

took its own sweet time in following, but this time they arrived in concert,

and the guards cowered in the face of the demons who were obviously

expressing their displeasure with the residents of the keep.

'What in the name of God is that?' cried out one of the guards, whose

name was Lunt, and he pointed with trembling finger towards the storm-

filled skies.

His partner, Fontayne, was about to scold him for being afraid of a

little lightning. Then he saw where the other was pointing, and no ready

answer came to his lips.

17

A blue box was descending from on high, lightning crackling furiously

around it. The box slammed this way and that, at one point even

tumbling completely over before righting itself. The closer it drew, the

more details became evident. There were cryptic runes across the front,

and a blue torch or perhaps some sort of impossibly round, glowing blue

rock was situated on top. The box was twirling as if dangling from a

string, and it arced down, down, straight towards the watchtower where

the guards stood transfixed.

With a cry of alarm they scattered to either side as the blue box

slammed into the tower. It crashed to a halt, dislodged stones raining

down upon it and not leaving any visible dents, despite the fact that the

box appeared to be made of simple wood. Clearly there was nothing

simple about the box.

Lunt and Fontayne had drawn their swords and they stood at the

ready, unsure of who or what they were dealing with. Fontayne's sword

was quivering slightly and it was all he could do to steady it so that he

wouldn't seem weak to his partner.

There was some sort of rustling noise, a scraping, from within the

box, and then something that turned out to be a door swung inward.

They jumped back, neither of them having a clue as to what to expect.

They were stunned when a man emerged from the box, squinting in the

darkness and looking chagrined when he realised there were witnesses

to his presence.

He was oddly attired, with a dark jacket and some sort of colourful

ribbon around his throat. His hair was thick, curly and brown, and he

leaned against the interior of the box for a moment as if trying to get his

bearings. 'Sorry,' he said. 'A bit new at this. Well... actually a bit old as

well. New and old, all at the same time. I suppose that didn't make a

good deal of sense just now, did it?'

The two guards shook their heads.

'Right. Don't worry about it. I certainly won't.' He stepped forward, swinging the door shut behind him.

Lunt and Fontayne had lowered their swords briefly, but now they brought them level, holding them in as threatening a manner as they could manage under the circumstances. 'Stay where you are, demon!' Fontayne shouted with as much fortitude as possible.

'I'm not a demon,' said the newcomer, indignantly. 'I'm the Doctor.'

That was when the lady's screams once more pierced the air. Instantly he looked up in response and said, 'And I can see I'm needed.'

He walked forward, ignoring the swords that briefly tried to block his path. He pushed them out of the way without deigning to give the guardsmen a second glance. They looked at each other, uncertain of whether they should remain on their post or follow the newcomer. Finally

Lunt said with impatience, 'Well? Go after him!' and pointed irritably.

Fontayne nodded and did as he was instructed even though Lunt had no

seniority over him.

The Doctor, meanwhile, made his way quickly through the castle,

drawn to the site of the problem by the continued screams of the poor woman. Fontayne, weighed down by his sword and armour, lagged sadly

behind.

Moments later, the Doctor burst into the room where the cries were originating from and said, all in one breath, 'What seems to be the problem here? I can help — oh dear.' He pivoted and turned his back, caught off guard. Fontayne skidded to a halt in front of him and nearly ran the Doctor through before he thought to lower his sword. The Doctor, looking abashed, said, 'I was rather expecting someone to be under assault by something large and mechanical or perhaps with scales and claws. Understand?'

Fontayne, who didn't, nodded anyway.

'Who are you?' cried one of the serving women, who was fluttering about helplessly while the lady on the bed continued to shriek.

'I'm the Doctor!'

'A doctor! Thank God! Get in here!'

'Yes, well,' and he raised a cautioning finger, 'see, women in labour aren't exactly my specialty ...'

'The baby's coming out wrong!' said the serving wench desperately.

'What kind of a doctor are you if you can't help a woman in need?'

The Doctor hesitated, then nodded decisively and said, 'Absolutely. Quite right.' He approached quickly, taking off his jacket as he did so. 'No midwife?' he inquired.

'She's taken ill.'

'Right. Then let's see what we've got.' He knelt over the woman on

the bed and smiled gamely. 'Hello, my dear. I'm the Doctor. You are?'

'In pain!'

'Yes. That's... abundantly clear.' Quickly, he checked the baby's attempted passage and didn't like what he was seeing. 'How long has she been at it?' he inquired.

'Close to two days.'

'Not good. Not good at all,' he murmured. 'Child's in distress...'

'I know that!' the labouring mother howled. As if the outcry had taken all of her strength, her head slumped back on the pillow. Gasping, and sounding less defiant, she said in a pleading voice, 'Please help me... please...'

'It's going to be all right,' he said to her softly. He reached up to her temples and seemed to caress her gently. Her eyes rolled up into the top of her head and then fluttered closed. Her head slumped to one side. 'My God, you killed her!' cried out one of the serving women. 'No,' said the Doctor firmly. 'Simply put her to sleep.'

Tut she needs to be awake to help push the child out!'

'The child is not coming out... at least not without killing her or dying itself or both.' He reached into his coat and pulled out an odd-looking cylindrical device.

Fontayne had been keeping back, but now his need to guard her ladyship from harm overcame his hesitancy as he saw what appeared to

be a weapon of some sort. 'Here now,' he said challengingly, 'what is that?'

'This device,' the Doctor said confidently, 'creates a fine-point laser for close-in work. Both opens and seals. Should be able to do this.' He pulled aside the fabric of her shift from her stomach and said with only a slight tremble of nervousness to his voice, 'After all, how hard can it be? They did it for Julius Caesar, and they didn't even have laser technology back then. At least I don't think they did. Hunh,' he said thoughtfully. 'I wonder if I performed that one as well. Would explain a lot. All right, then. Let's welcome the little person to the world.'

He ignited the laser and it emitted a high-pitched sound that intimidated everyone watching to such a degree that they repeatedly crossed themselves. Once engaged in the operation, all hesitation melted away, and in less than a minute the Doctor was holding a newborn infant in his hands. The baby lay stunned in his arms for a moment and then began to cry, pitifully weak at first but gaining in strength with every passing second. The Doctor severed the umbilical cord and swaddled the child in cloths that the serving women had provided. 'Here, take the little chap,' he said, and then went back to work with the laser, sealing the wound. When he was finished he inspected

the thin white scar that the laser had left and nodded in approval.

Perhaps sensing her child's distress on some level, the tired woman slowly began to come round. 'My baby... my...' she said groggily.

'He's fine. He's right here,' the Doctor assured her and lay the squalling child upon her bosom. The child's cries trailed off into sniffles as the closeness of his mother calmed him.

She stroked his cheek lovingly. As drained as she had been in her struggles to deliver him, all of that seemed irrelevant to her now as she clutched her son close. 'Hello, my little Arthur,' she whispered.

'Arthur,' said the Doctor. He stared at her oddly. 'Your name wouldn't be... Igraine, would it?'

'No.'

'Oh. All right, because -'

'It's Igerna.'

The Doctor stopped dead. 'And your husband... Uther Pendragon?'

She didn't reply. Instead she was drifting, hovering near sleep, her exhausted child cuddling against her.

Rather than disturb her further, the Doctor turned back to Fontayne, who was regarding him with open amazement. He repeated the question. Fontayne still looked stunned. 'Why do you need to ask me? You're obviously a wizard...'

'Yes, yes, I'm a regular Merlin,' said the Doctor impatiently. 'Her husband -?'

'As you say, Uther Pendragon. But...' He hesitated, then said in a

lowered voice, 'Thing is... there's dispute as to who the child's sire is. Her

ladyship, she swore that her previous husband, Gorlois, Duke of

Cornwall, came to her and conceived yon infant. Except Gorlois died on

the battlefield miles away that same night. Pendragon always fancied her

ladyship and took her to wife. Still, 'tis passing strange. Some believe

that Pendragon himself came to Igerna and did the deed, disguised

through some mystical means.' His eyes narrowed. 'It wasn't your doing,

was it, Merlin?'

'No, no. And my name isn't really...'

Then he stopped and thought. Bits and pieces of things he knew, or

had always thought he'd known, or had known and forgotten, began to

filter back to him.

'It_ may have been my doing,' the Doctor said slowly. 'Then again, we

wizards are crafty in the way we handle our affairs. I'm afraid I can't be

completely forthright with you. I mean, I could. I could tell you everything.

But then you'd be hearing things that mortal ears were not meant to hear

and I'd have to transform you into a frog or whatnot.'

'No!' an alarmed Fontayne cried out, clapping his hands over his ears.

'Speak not, I pray thee! I'll hear none of it!'

'That's probably for the best,' the Doctor said reassuringly.

He went back to mother and child and, leaning close to her, said softly, 'You take good care of him. He's got a most impressive future. And I intend to be there for it.'

Will you?' Igerna put out a hand and rested it upon the Doctor's.

At that moment the doors to the chamber burst wide open and Uther Pendragon strode in. He was barrel-chested, with a great bristling beard and arms the size of ham hocks. 'Well?' he bellowed. 'Is it done? Is it finally done?' He stopped and stared up and down at the Doctor. 'Who and what are you supposed to be?'

'He's a wizard, milord,' Fontayne informed him. 'He's just brought your son into the world.' Then hastily he corrected, 'Your adopted son.'

'Yes, well... blood of mine or no blood of mine, he is equally my son.'

Uther approached the Doctor. 'You are a wizard? I thought wizards were taller. And older.'

'I've been both,' the Doctor replied easily.

'You speak riddles.'

'I dislike wizards,' said Uther. His hand was resting on the hilt of his sword. 'What is your name?'

The Doctor hesitated and then, with a shrug, said, 'Some call me... Merlin.'

To his surprise Uther appeared taken aback. 'You? But... how? I

mean...' He started to stammer a bit more and then fell silent.

The reaction confused the Doctor for a moment, and then he stepped in close and said intently, 'Where do you know me from?'

'L.. nowhere. I misspoke.'

The Doctor pulled out a different device from the one Fontayne had seen before and activated it. Smaller and cylindrical, the tip glowed blue and he brought it close to Uther's face. With as much menace as he could muster, he said warningly, 'Don't force me to use this.'

Uther stared at it nervously for a moment, and then cleared his throat

and said brusquely, 'Outside. Let the new mother rest with her son. It... is a son...?'

'Yes,' the Doctor assured him.

They moved out into the corridor, the Doctor easing the heavy doors closed behind him. He turned to face Uther. Fontayne kept an ear out, listening carefully.

'All right,' the Doctor said, keeping the cylinder near Uther's face.

Uther couldn't take his eyes off it. 'Speak candidly.'

'Of what? Of matters you already know?' demanded Uther, trying to keep his voice down so that it wouldn't carry. 'Am I to believe there are two wizards calling themselves "Merlin" wandering the land?'

'There's only one that I know of. Let me guess. "Merlin" offered to

disguise your appearance so that you could pay a visit to the lady Igerna,

whom you'd fancied ever since you first laid eyes on her. That, right there, is your trueborn son.'

'Aye,' Uther said with a growl. 'Merlin — or you — or someone claiming to be you — came to me and offered the proposition.'

'And what did he — or I — or someone claiming to be me — hope to gain in return?'

'Nothing. Not a thing. "Setting matters right" is what he claimed.'

'What did he look like?'

'Never saw him clearly. Wore a robe with a hood.'

'You cut a clandestine deal with an unknown hooded individual and had no idea why he would offer you a boon?'

'That,' said Uther, 'is about the size of it.'

‘Hmm,' muttered the Doctor. Apparently without giving it any further thought, he slid the device back into his pocket. Then he turned and walked away from Uther, leaving a puzzled new father in his wake. Fontayne hesitated and then headed off after the Doctor. He followed the quickly moving wizard only to discover that he was retracing his steps and, moments later, had returned to his large blue box. Lunt, who

had not moved from his post, watched in confusion as the Doctor walked

straight past him and into the box. He started to swing the door shut behind him and Fontayne, his sword out, jammed it in the doorway before the wizard could do so. With a quick, levering twist he shoved

the

door partway open and started to push his way in.

He stopped dead, his eyes huge.

A vast, glittering room stretched out before him, as large as any

throne room that he'd ever seen.

The Doctor, with his hand resting on the door, looked at him severely

and once again held up that same blue-tipped cylinder. 'Do not meddle in

the affairs of wizards.'

Wha- what would that do to me?' Fontayne managed to ask.

The wizard maintained a deeply angry scowl for a moment and then,

like a child caught in a lie, he grinned broadly and said, 'Honestly?

Nothing. All a bluff. Off with you now. Wizard's work is never done, you

know.'

He slammed the door shut with Fontayne on the outside. Fontayne

pounded his mailed fist against the door and shouted, 'Wait, Merlin! I

have questions! You cannot just — !'

Suddenly the box began to emit a sound like a deep wheezing. A blue

glow emanated from the top. Fontayne took an alarmed step back and

then watched with open astonishment as slowly, incredibly, impossibly,

the whole thing vanished.

They stared at the empty space for a time and then Lunt grabbed

Fontayne by the shoulder, turned him around to face him, and demanded, 'What happened? What did you see?'

Fontayne simply shook his head. He never spoke of it to Lunt.

Later that night, however, his two-year-old son toddled up to him. Fontayne was seated in front of the hearth and riffled the youngster's hair when he came near. The boy was clutching a wooden sword and was whipping it through the air with far more enthusiasm than art. Still, Fontayne appreciated the boy's spirit. He drew him near, sat the lad on his knee, and said, 'I saw a wizard today, Ancelyn. Let me tell you all about him.'

Ancelyn listened with rapt attention.

ii.

The TARDIS slowly materialised later that night next to a blue lake with a surface flat as glass, and a grove of trees nearby. Moments later the Doctor emerged and looked around. 'I know you're here!' he called out. ‘No use hiding!'

Silence. Nothing stirred.

'Come on, then!' He patted the sturdy frame of the police box. 'My TARDIS was able to detect the presence of your TARDIS!'

Then he heard something creak... the sound of a door being opened. There was not, however, any sort of visible structure around that would normally contain a door. His gaze was drawn to the trees and then he

saw that one of the tree trunks was swinging open as if a door had been

built into it.

A man stepped out from within.

He was clad in long, flowing blue robes studded with stars, and he

had a puckish smile on his round face. 'How very clever of your TARDIS!

I suppose the old girl has to have some capabilities to make up for its

wonky chameleon circuit, eh?'

'Who are you?' the Doctor asked.

'A Time Lord,' replied the robed individual.

'Yes, I rather worked that out from your TARDIS,' the Doctor said

snappishly.

'We have met before — on Gallifrey, before you left and started

calling yourself Doctor. I must say, I don't think much of this

regeneration. The long, flowing white hair you had back in the old days

gave you such gravitas. Now you look...'

'I look what?'

He sighed. 'Like a bit of a ponce, to be honest.'

The Doctor, to his own surprise, was taken aback. 'Really?' He

examined his clothes, his hands. 'I was going for Byron-esque.'

'Fell a tad short, I'm afraid.' There seemed to be actual regret in his

voice.

Shaking off the unexpected criticism, the Doctor drew himself up and said, 'So... what do you call yourself?'

'Merlin, actually.'

'Really. We seem to have an abundance of them, I'm afraid.'

'You as well?'

The Doctor bowed slightly. 'Many are called, few are chosen. I serve as I must.'

'As do I,' replied Merlin. 'You desperately fighting to maintain the natural order of things, while I,' and he smiled lopsidedly, 'see the possibilities in shaking things up. Order versus chaos. The most primal battle of all. Tragic that you should be on the losing side.'

'Losing side? How do you figure that?'

Merlin gave him a pitying stare. 'If order held sway, my dear Doctor, then the universe would never have been created, would it? Long before there were even Time Lords such as us, there was nothing. If the status quo had been maintained, there would still be nothing. Chaos is the mortal enemy of nothingness.'

'You're no one's mortal enemy,' the Doctor said disdainfully. 'You're an irritant. Although,' he went on to admit, 'I don't quite understand what you're playing at. I take it that you were the one who enabled Uther to disguise himself as Gorlois?'

'Of course,' grinned Merlin. 'Simple extension of the chameleon circuit. Created an impenetrable illusion.'

'But according to legend, that's how Arthur Pendragon was actually conceived. How is contributing to history's proper course aiding in your attempt to spread chaos?'

'Because,' Merlin said, 'without Arthur, there would be no Round Table. No Camelot. And I wouldn't have the opportunity to introduce these.' He pulled a barrel-shaped weapon from within his robes. 'Isn't it lovely,' he cooed. 'Found it in a weapons cache not far from here. Rather amazing, actually. I'm reasonably certain it was the work of a Sontaran.

There were all sorts of weapons in there, and assorted other gimmicks as well. As far as I could tell he was quite the collector. Now if you ask me, they shouldn't be gathering dust hidden away. No, no... they should be shared.'

'You can't be serious!' said the Doctor. 'Introducing high-tech, alien weaponry into a medieval period such as this? It could reshape the entirety of this reality! Create an entirely divergent time stream!'

'You say that as if it's a bad thing.'

'It is a bad thing!'

'There's no bad things or good things, Doctor. There's just things, and what you do with them. For instance, look what I can do with this thing.'

With that pronouncement, he aimed the weapon at the Doctor and

fired.

Even though he had almost no warning, almost no was very different from none. It was enough for the Doctor to lunge to one side, the blast exploding harmlessly over his head. The TARDIS door was hanging open and the Doctor darted inside, slamming it shut behind.

He flipped on the monitor so that he could have a clear view outside. He didn't like what he was seeing.

Merlin had retreated to his own TARDIS. The tree was beginning to glow, clearly preparing to jump to another place and time.

'Come on, old girl, come on,' the Doctor muttered as his hands flew over the TARDIS's control boards. Within seconds he had managed to lock onto the chronal signature of Merlin's TARDIS. By the time it had phased out of existence, the Doctor had his trail and was right after him.

Even as the TARDIS hurtled through the corridor of time and space, however, the Doctor's recollections flew back to an encounter he'd had with knights before, in his previous incarnation. Knights who had seemingly come to Earth from a parallel dimension, armed not only with swords, but also with futuristic weaponry that wasn't remotely in keeping with what one would have expected. The knights he'd encountered during that experience had all identified him as 'Merlin', although admitting that he didn't look the same as when they had known him. Now it appeared that some answers would be forthcoming.

'All right, then,' the Doctor said. 'There's a time for everything. And now is as good a time as any.' He bent over the controls, as the TARDIS followed Merlin's ship. He couldn't help but feel that his being able to track Merlin was far too easy, that in some way Merlin was facilitating said tracking.

Which meant he wanted the Doctor to follow him.

Which wasn't necessarily a good thing...

iii.

Morgaine the Sunkiller, Dominator of the thirteen worlds and Battle Queen of the S'Rax, lay on her back in the woods of Selledon, the sweat on her bare skin cooling in the night air. She stared at the glittering stars in the night sky and a smile spread slowly across her face.

'Here. You could probably use this,' a male voice said softly to her.

She propped herself up on one elbow as a soft cape was draped over her. She clutched it around herself and smiled sheepishly. 'I am... unaccustomed to feeling vulnerable,' she said. 'But with you it seems... permissible somehow.'

He chuckled at that and dropped down onto the ground next to her. He had dressed, clad in a light tunic and leggings. If the chill air was bothering him, he gave no indication of it. 'You always say precisely what's on your mind, don't you?'

'Should I not?'

'There's no reason you shouldn't, no. It's just that it makes you different from any other woman I've ever encountered.' He looked

annoyed. 'Simpering, prattling fools, the lot of them. This latest one that my advisers want me to marry... Guinevere. She's undoubtedly the worst...'

'Undoubtedly? Meaning...?'

'Well, I haven't met her yet. But she's well connected — her father is a wealthy land baron and highly influential with the other nobles, and it's felt that if the two of us are wed, it can solidify my power base...' He waved off the notion. 'But why should I care about any of that?'

'You're right. You shouldn't,' Morgaine said firmly. 'You, Arthur, are the King. You need not do anything that you have no desire to do.'

'That's what I keep saying, but no one seems to agree.' Arthur sighed and lay next to her. 'You're staring at the stars so intently.'

'I'm trying to pick out which one is the sun of my home world.' ‘Ah, yes.' He laughed softly. 'You're from a place not of this Earth.' 'You still doubt me?'

'Well, it does seem a dubious claim, you have to admit. Why would someone from another world have the slightest interest in us?'

'Because of your weapons,' she said candidly.

He gave her an odd look. 'Our weapons? What do you mean?'

A short distance away, the Doctor — watching from behind a grove of

trees — pricked up his ears.

'I mean what I say,' Morgaine said. 'Your weapons. I see the rest of your world, and where matters are in terms of your technological development... and yet you wield energy weapons that defy the rest of your world's development.'

'I know. I dislike it intensely. It doesn't seem honourable, somehow. Men standing at a distance from each other, firing away. If men are to meet in combat, then they should meet. It should be hand to hand, face to face, blade to blade.'

'That is a superb way to be killed,' said Morgaine, and she drew a hand gently across his face. 'I would not wish it so, that you were killed.'

'Such things cannot be avoided, I'm afraid. Death comes to all.'

'Perhaps. But things can be done to stave off that day for as long as possible. I have something for you.'

'Do you?'

'Close your eyes.'

He smiled even as he did as instructed.

'Open them.'

He did so and looked down.

A sword gleamed in the moonlight.

Arthur's breath caught in his throat. He reached for the sword tentatively and then wrapped his fingers around the hilt. He lifted it high,

swinging it from side to side. The blade gave off a soft hum, as if it were

singing.

'It's amazing,' he whispered. 'I've ne'er seen its like.'

'Nor will again. It is called a S'rax Cal Byr.'

'Then that is what I shall call it: Excalibur.'

26

‘That's...' She appeared ready to correct his pronunciation, but then clearly changed her mind. 'A good name.'

'I must go,' said Arthur. 'I am expected back at court. I dare not tarry.'

'Hurrying off to Guinevere?'

He made a dismissive noise. 'She arrives this eve. I shall send her packing forthwith, and then you and I can...'

'Can what? Marry?' She laughed at that. 'We have had this discussion before, my love. I am not the type who ties herself to a single male. Although, were I that sort,' and she smiled affectionately, 'you would tempt me sorely. Aye, you would. Not that it would happen, but still... who knows, I suppose? The universe is a vast and endlessly surprising place.'

'It is at that.'

Holding Excalibur proudly, he kissed Morgaine lightly on the forehead and headed away from the clearing.

The Doctor hesitated, unsure of whether to follow Arthur or approach Morgaine. The ideal solution would have been to ignore both of them and

search instead for Merlin. However, he had lost track of Merlin's TARDIS.

He knew that it had arrived here, and hopefully when Merlin reactivated

it, he would know and be able to follow him yet again. But the tracking

instrumentation that he'd used to find Merlin originally had failed him this

time, leading him to believe his suspicions had been correct. Merlin had

let him find him before.

Deciding that little was to be gained from pursing Morgaine, he

instead stealthily followed the King. They were a short distance from the

clearing when Arthur abruptly stopped in his tracks, turned, and leveled

the formidable weapon in the Doctor's general direction. 'Whoever you

are, come out,' he challenged. 'Did you think I wouldn't hear you there? I

know you've been following me. Whoever you are, if you think to rob me,

you will find your shoulders lonely for your arms!'

The Doctor smiled in spite of himself as he stepped out of the

shadows of the trees. He made certain to keep his hands where they

could be readily seen. 'A credible threat, Your Majesty... and yet I think

you'll find that I pose no threat whatsoever.'

Arthur wasn't lowering his guard for a moment. 'You know I am the

King, and yet you would stalk me, skulk about...?'

‘... with impunity, yes. I suppose that comes from the fact that I know you of old.'

'How old?'

'Seconds old.'

Arthur blinked in confusion. 'I don't understand...'

The Doctor held up his hands. 'These fine instruments brought you into this world. I don't expect you to remember, naturally, since you were quite young at the time...'

Slowly Arthur lowered his sword. In a voice barely above a whisper, he said, 'Speak your name.'

'Merlin,' said the Doctor, relishing the syllables.

27

To the Doctor's surprise, Arthur dropped to one knee.

'Here, now, none of that,' the Doctor said in a scolding tone. 'You're the King. The King kneels to none...'

'To a wizard responsible for my walking this world? I kneel gladly.'

'All right, all right, as you wish, but that's sufficient genuflection for one day. Up with you now.'

Arthur rose but continued to look in wide-eyed amazement at the Doctor. 'I never thought this day would come. You look exactly the same as the way you were described to me.'

'Yes, well,' and he yawned widely as if it was of minor importance,

'that comes with being immortal, I suppose.'

'Immortal!'

'I don't like to brag.'

'You must come to my court!' Then he seemed to think better of his tone. 'That is to say, I am not giving you an order or decree. That is... I wouldn't be so presumptuous.'

'Not presumptuous at all. Happy to accommodate.' He gave Excalibur an appraising look. 'Would you mind if I...?' He put out his hands.

Understanding immediately, Arthur handed him Excalibur.

His attention was immediately drawn to the pommel. He tapped it experimentally, listened for a telltale 'ping,' and was satisfied that what he had surmised was correct. It was a tracking device. Morgaine had given him the sword so that she would always be able to find him. 'Very clever,' he said more to himself than to Arthur. He toyed with the idea of convincing Arthur to give him the sword... to get it as far from Arthur as he possibly could. Just as quickly as he considered the idea, he discarded it. Sizeable portions of Arthur’s future had already been written. If the Doctor attempted to undo them, then it could create a time paradox, which was precisely the sort of disruption that a Time Lord had to avoid.

'It's... an amazing piece of work,' said the Doctor as he extended the

mighty sword back to Arthur. 'A suggestion, if I may...'

'Anything, Wizard. Anything at all.'

'Don't tell people that you got it from a woman you met in the woods.'

'You... know about Morgaine?'

'Well, I am a wizard, you know.'

'Yes, of .. of course. But then what should I tell them?'

'Oh,' the Doctor said with a shrug, 'a lady from a lake. Or you pulled it from a stone. Something that will be considered the stuff of legends. Don't worry,' and he clapped a friendly hand on Arthur's shoulder, 'I'll help you think of something. Now... about this Guinevere...'

'Her.' Arthur sniffed disdainfully. 'How could she possibly compare to the magnificence of Morgaine?'

'You'd be surprised. Let's talk, you and I, about many things... fools... and kings...'

iv.

28

The battlefield of Baden was stained red from the blood that had been running across it.

Ancelyn lay sprawled on the ground, clutching his sword, trying to make the pounding in his head cease. He fought the impulse to call for aid. Somehow it simply didn't seem worthy for a knight of the Round Table to seek succour in such a plaintive manner.

It was odd. Here, at what he was quite certain would be the end of his

life, he thought he would see visions of his father or mother, or his comrades in arms, or even the King himself.

No. No, as it turned out, the image that kept presenting itself to his mind's eye was Guinevere.

Guinevere, the queen of Camelot.

How unlike a queen she had seemed when she had first come to Camelot. How tentative, how uncertain. The King had appeared ready to reject her from the start, but there had been Merlin, arriving from nowhere, whispering in his ear, setting the King in the right direction.

And thus had Camelot acquired both its queen... and an implacable enemy, all at the same time.

Slumped behind a tree, Ancelyn surveyed the remains of the battle before him. He had a trail of red liquid dribbling from between the plates of his armour, but he was certain that the wounds he had sustained were not fatal. The firepower that the enemy wielded was formidable, yes. But the improvements that Merlin had made upon their armour enabled it to withstand multiple direct hits. The only problem was that the human body beneath the armour remained mere flesh and blood. The armour could endure significant pounding, but his body still suffered damage from the impact. He told himself that it was nothing he could not withstand. He was a knight of Camelot, and his king needed him.

That was when he saw his enemy.

Mordred was striding confidently across the plains of Baden. He had none of his normal retainers or guards around him. That was just his arrogance showing. He was so certain that he had his opponents on the run that he felt no need to take any precautions over his own safety.

Ancelyn waited in hiding, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword tightly.

He blinked his eyes furiously against the sweat that was dripping into them. As soon as Mordred was within striking distance, then he would...

‘Mordred!'

Mordred had been carrying his helmet tucked under one arm. He stopped in his tracks at the strident voice and grinned upon seeing its source. 'Highness. How charming to see you. Would that the circumstances were better...'

'Would that they were,' said Arthur as he strode forward. He was likewise not wearing his helmet, but he had Excalibur at the ready.

Although there was grim determination in his voice, there was a hint of sadness in his face. Ancelyn was only a few years older than Arthur, but Ancelyn was lucky enough to have maintained his youthful appearance

while the King already looked worn and haggard beyond his years. It was

little wonder. He had been in a state of almost perpetual warfare since marrying Guinevere. That was a long time to endure a state of siege. 'But then, the circumstances are entirely of your making, Mordred. Yours and your mother's.'

'She sends her regards, and requested that — should we encounter each other — I make certain that your death is as prolonged as possible.'

'For what it is worth... I very much doubt she said that.'

Mordred bowed mockingly. 'I have been known to embellish on occasion.' He glanced around. 'I see no sign of your pet wizard. His comings and goings remain as unpredictable as ever.'

'Merlin appears when I need him.'

'Then it would be wise for him to appear now.'

Mordred reached behind his back and suddenly there was a pulse blaster in his hand.

Arthur barely had time to bring his arms up and shield his head before the blaster exploded against his armour. Arthur was knocked back off his feet, hitting the ground heavily. Excalibur felt from his grasp.

'Far too easy,' said Mordred, chording, as he advanced. His blaster was aimed squarely between Arthur's eyes.

Having seen enough, Ancelyn charged, howling a battle cry. Mordred was caught off guard, but only briefly, as he swung the blaster around and fired at Ancelyn. Ancelyn brought his buckler up and deflected the

blast. It slowed him, but only briefly, and then he slammed full tilt into

Mordred. The gun flew from Mordred's hand, and before he could pull his

sword, Ancelyn had him on his back.

Mordred tried to rise but Ancelyn's sword point was at his throat.

Realizing his danger, Mordred remained exactly where he was. He even

managed to force a wan smile, as if this were all some sort of show.

'What shall I do with him, highness?' said Ancelyn. 'He would make a

valuable prisoner of war... but an even better corpse.'

'You would like to do that, wouldn't you,' Mordred said challengingly.

'It would make matters so convenient. Why, if you disposed of me, then

the King would never know, would he.'

'Know what?' asked Arthur. He got to his feet and was now looking

from Ancelyn to Mordred in confusion.

'Do not listen to him, sire! His mouth is filled with lies, his heart with

venom!'

'Yes, yes... so you say,' said Mordred. 'And that's what you would

have Arthur believe. Far better that than the truth.'

'What would such as you know of the truth, Mordred?' said Arthur.

'You and your mother...'

'Yes, my mother. Oh, what you did to her, Arthur. I wouldn't have

thought it possible. That such as she could lose her heart to such as

you...'

'Such as she has no heart,' Arthur said icily.

'So you would believe. Yet you wield her sword, I notice. Then again,

I suppose it all evens out, when someone else's sword is being dipped into your well.'

'Shut up! Shut your lying mouth!' Ancelyn snapped at him.

'What is he talking about, Ancelyn?'

'Lies, highness. All lies.'

Mordred said with a weary sigh, 'Is that not always the way? The husband is always the last to know.'

The casual comment rocked Arthur on his heels. He gaped at Ancelyn and Ancelyn tried to respond, but no words came.

'Trust is a terrible thing to abuse,' Mordred said, his voice tinged with regret.

'You lie!' bellowed Arthur, and he spun and drew back Excalibur, ready to bring it slamming down into Mordred's chest.

That was when a powerful blast of energy ripped through Arthur, lifting him off his feet and sending him thudding into a nearby tree.

Ancelyn brought up his sword just as a similar blast crashed into him as well. This, however, was not something generated by a mere weapon. No, this was power flowing directly from Morgaine herself. Her hand outstretched, she let loose a guffaw as Ancelyn's defences amounted to nothing. He spun through the air and crashed heavily to earth. He felt his

teeth rattling along with his armour.

'Arthur, Arthur, Arthur,' Morgaine said with a lilting taunt. Her hands were still glowing with her power. 'Did you truly believe that I would allow you to destroy my son?'

'I believe anything when it comes to you, Morgaine,' Arthur said. He was trying desperately to sit up but his body was still paralyzed from the force of her attack.

'You brought this on yourself, Arthur Rex.'

'You would blame me for following the dictates of my heart?'

'Yes!' The word was ripped savagely from her throat. 'That little queen of yours... that nothing! That upstart! What does it say of you that you were so blind you could not realise it? And what does it say of me that I consorted with one who was so foolish?'

'What it says...' began Mordred.

'Shut up,' she said, cutting him off. 'I was speaking rhetorically.'

'Sorry,' he said contritely.

'Now, Arthur,' Morgaine said, as if the rest of the world was forgotten. 'We have danced this dance for far too long. Perhaps destroying you will ease the pain I feel. And if it does not,' she shrugged, 'A well. I shall endure.'

She brought her hands, charged with mystic energy, up in front of her... and suddenly was gone.

It was not that she had disappeared from the spot. It was that she had been obscured from view as a glowing blue box appeared in the air around her. Ancelyn watched in amazement as, like a spectre, the ghostly box materialised into all-too-great solidity.., then disappeared once more.

31

v.

Morgaine looked around in bewilderment for a moment at the inside of the TARDIS. The Doctor stood with his arms folded, a superior expression on his face. Not having seen the outside of the time machine,

she was unaware that the interior was far vaster than the exterior, or else

she would certainly have commented upon it. As it was, her malevolent

gaze fell upon the Doctor and her mouth twisted in a contemptuous sneer.

'You, I take it, are the fabled Merlin. The eminent sorcerer who has taken it upon himself to guide Arthur in his kingship.'

'Only here and there,' he said, trying to sound modest. 'I pop in and out where I think he needs me.'

She looked around the TARDIS. 'You are far more than some mere hedge wizard, that is obvious. More than mere human, I take it.'

'As are you, Battle Queen of the S'rax.'

Morgaine took a step back as if she'd been punched in the face. 'How

did you know that? We have never met before!'

'Actually, believe it or not, we have. You might say I live backwards in

time. That which is to come, I know. I am curious, though, what one such

as you — dominator of the thirteen worlds and all — would be doing on a

backwater planet such as this one?'

'The weaponry,' she said. 'Weapons of a magnitude that should never

have existed in this time and place.' She began to circle the control room.

The Doctor, matching her stride, kept pace with her. They were like two

lions stalking each other, searching for a sign of weakness before one or

the other of them would strike. 'It called to me. To my son... to my

minions.'

'And once here, you met Arthur.'

'Yes.' She let out a contented sigh. 'He was like nothing that I

expected.

Such an old soul he was, and filled with an energy that made him

unique...'

'That might well have been me you were detecting.'

She frowned. 'You?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I brought him into the world. And I have

certain... energies... that tend to cling to me... and sometimes to others.

What you perceive in him...'

'I see in you as well,' she said, her eyes narrowing. 'What are you?' 'A traveller. Nothing more than that.'

'Oh... I think much more than that.'

The Doctor abruptly walked across the TARDIS control room and up to Morgaine. His face was a mask. 'What you think,' he said, 'is of little consequence. Beings who live only for war, for strife, for endless combat... they are of no interest to me. You could have been so much more, Morgaine. But you're unable to rise above your nature, and you never will be. Ultimately you would try to bend Arthur to your will, and

when you were unable to do so, you would destroy him. Except I'm not going to allow that to happen.'

'And how are you going to stop me?'

'For one thing, I'm going to prevent you from leaving this place.'

'Oh, are you,' Morgaine said imperiously. She glanced behind herself, saw the door, walked towards it and declared, ‘I'd like to see you try!' She strode out and stopped dead.

Heat hit her in waves. Trackless desert and sweeping dunes stretched out in all directions. The sun hammered down upon her from above. 'What the — ?'

'All right, you win this round,' the Doctor called cheerfully from behind

her. She turned and saw him standing in the doorway, a hand resting on

the door. 'I guess I couldn't stop you from walking out at that.'

He slammed the door in her face.

'Merlin!' shrieked Morgaine as she pounded in futility on the door. The door didn't so much as shudder beneath her blows. 'Merlin, you underhanded trickster! Open this door, right now! Open this —'

'Consider yourself lucky,' came the Doctor's voice from the other side of the door. 'I could have deposited you on another planet. Or another time. But I didn't want to leave you to be someone else's problem. I'm hoping that this will serve as enough of an object lesson for you. Feel free to ponder the folly of your ways.'

The blue box let out a steady noise like a rusty squeezebox and then slowly vanished from sight, leaving an infuriated Morgaine shouting and

cursing, with no one around for miles to hear her.

When the Doctor rematerialised the TARDIS seconds later, virtually no time had passed since he had first disappeared with Morgaine. He stepped through the door and the startled expressions of the men at arms greeted him.

'Where is my mother?' Mordred demanded.

The Doctor coughed. 'I — er — laid her low with my mighty arts.'

Mordred came right at him, but Ancelyn was blocking his path and he dropped Mordred with a single punch. Mordred went down, moaning softly before passing out. 'Allow me to dispatch him forthwith, highness,'

said Ancelyn.

Slowly Arthur shook his head. 'The dungeon for him, at least for the

time being. I wish to speak to him at length about... certain matters.'

The look he gave Ancelyn was significant enough that Ancelyn once

again felt the need to tell him, 'Whatever he asserts about me, highness,

is merely more of his calumnies. I would never...' He hesitated, and then

turned to the Doctor. 'Tell him, Merlin.'

'Oh, he would never,' the Doctor said with assurance. But he was

considering the tales of Guinevere and Lancelot — the French knight

who, the French writers of the legends had decided, was so charismatic

that the queen was willing to cuckold the King for him. Quelle surprise.

Ancelyn... Lancelot... there was just enough similarity to cause the

Doctor some concern.

So it was that, after what seemed no more than a moment's

consideration, the Doctor said, 'But you know what? I think it might

benefit all of us if I had a little chat with the queen. You understand, don't

you, Arthur? There's a good man,' and he stepped back into the TARDIS

and slammed the door before Arthur could reply.

Even as the TARDIS vanished, Arthur turned to Ancelyn and said in

annoyance, 'The ways of wizards are beginning to wear thin with me. I

think I shall talk to my queen myself. You have no objection to that, do

you, Ancelyn?'

Ancelyn bent his head and said, 'None, highness.'

'Good.'

It was the last time that Ancelyn saw his king alive.

vi.

The TARDIS did not rematerialise where the Doctor expected it to. He

stepped out with the same sort of confidence that Morgaine had

displayed when he'd abandoned her, and then halted in confusion as he

looked around. This was not the castle of Camelot. Instead this was the

interior of...

'I know this place,' he whispered. Surrounded by gleaming silver

walls, by advanced technology. 'I know this ship...'

'Do you?'

The voice had come from an elevated slab that was situated in the

middle of the room. The Doctor took one look at the individual who was

seated on it and said, 'You!'

'Me,' said Merlin cheerfully. He appeared genuinely happy to see the

Doctor. 'And you, Doctor, have been quite the busy bee, haven't you.'

'I do what I can.'

'As do I,' said Merlin. 'Having you chase after me from one time to the next... always giving you the slip. But what can I say? I tired of it.'

The Doctor started towards him... and slammed into an invisible wall.

He turned in the other direction and discovered that he couldn't move in that direction either.

A stasis field. 'Why are you doing this?!' the Doctor said.

'I thought we'd been over that.' Merlin gestured around them. 'Do you like my TARDIS? Be honest now.'

'It's an older model and it's a piece of garbage.'

'Then again, there's something to be said for dishonesty. At least my chameleon circuit functions better than yours. Remember how I said I'd developed a technique for extending its influence? Observe.'

His appearance shifted and, to the Doctor's astonishment, he was looking at the mirror image of himself. Merlin turned in place, arms extended to either side. 'What do you think? Too much?'

'Shut this field down! Now!'

'Oh, I don't think so. And don't think for a moment that you'll somehow manage to reach the controls to the stasis field.' He held up a small

remote control. 'It's right here. And here is where it will stay. Now if you'll excuse me... I have a king to kill.'

'Why?'

Merlin looked at him with his own eyes and there was pity in them.

'You truly don't comprehend the entire "I do what I can" philosophy, do

you?' He walked over to the Doctor's TARDIS and said cheerfully, 'You

don't mind if I borrow this, do you? There's a lad.'

And the Doctor watched helplessly as his TARDIS faded away,

piloted by the man using his face.

He pulled out his sonic screwdriver and tried to use it against the

stasis field. Nothing happened. The Time Lord was faced with the

growing realisation that he was running out of time.

vii.

Queen Guinevere paced the floor of the royal bedchamber, her

thoughts whirling.

It was taking too long, far too long. Her beloved Arthur should have

returned by now. This was always the worst part. The waiting during

these campaigns. Waiting to receive word of whether her husband was

alive or...

No. There was simply no 'or' here. Her husband was Arthur Rex. He

was invincible. He would live forever.

She started slightly when she heard a familiar sound. As soon as she

did, though, she immediately relaxed. She had become accustomed to

the odd comings and goings of Merlin. His arrivals generally portended

good things for the reign of Arthur Pendragon.

The blue box that moved wherever it wished appeared like the

magical construct that it was in the bedchamber. The door swung open

and the wizard emerged. He had a strange look on his face that caught Guinevere by surprise. He seemed insufferably pleased with himself. It was an odd way for a wizard to comport himself.

‘Ah. Highness,' he said, and then his face darkened. 'Thank heavens I'm here to warn you. The enemy is at the door.'

'What?' Guinevere was confused. This was not the news that she was expecting. 'Now'

'Yes. Mordred has triumphed. Your husband is dead, and now Mordred comes for you to take you as his own.'

Blood was pounding against Guinevere's temples even as a cold, numbing fury surged within her. 'Then he will find far more than he anticipated,' she said heatedly.

Quickly she crossed to the wall and pulled down a crossbow that was mounted upon it. A quiver of bolts hung nearby and she selected one, loading the crossbow even as she heard footsteps approaching the door.

'He comes,' Merlin said. 'Prepare yourself.'

Her hands momentarily trembled but then held steady as she summoned a mental picture of Mordred with a crossbow bolt planted in

his chest. 'This,' she murmured, 'is for Arthur.'

35

The door swung open and her finger squeezed the trigger. The

bowstring twanged and the bolt streaked across the room and thudded

into its target.

Guinevere let out a startled gasp. All the air seemed to have been

sucked out of her lungs, and when she finally did manage to find some, it

emerged in the form of a horrified scream.

Arthur was standing in the doorway looking down in confusion at the

bolt buried in his chest, still quivering from the impact. Then he shifted

his gaze, his eyes already clouding over, to Guinevere.

‘Oops. My mistake,' said Merlin. Then he let out a demented laugh...

Followed by a startled yelp.

Even as Arthur fell to his knees, bewildered as ever by this turn of

events, Merlin disappeared into thin air. His familiar box remained right

where it was, waiting patiently for the return of its master.

The crossbow slipped from Guinevere's fingers. It clattered to the

floor even as she ran to her husband's side. He was falling so slowly that

she had more than enough time to catch him and ease him onto his

back. He looked at her uncomprehendingly. Was it something I said...?'

he gasped, and there was fluid bubbling up in his throat.

'I_ I thought you were Mordred! Merlin told me —'

'It wasn't me.'

She blinked in confusion as Merlin strode in through the door. She

was on her feet in an instant, charging him, howling, 'Murderer!

Betrayer!'

He caught her fists before they could pound against him.

'It wasn't me! It was an imposter!' Merlin told her forcefully. 'He

managed to bind me for a short time. But the field dissipated. I suspect

something happened to him, something that caused his control device to

shut down. I came in his TARDIS as quickly as I could —'

'I don't understand anything that you're talking about!' Guinevere cried

out. 'just save him! Save my husband! Save my love!'

'Yes! Yes, I will.' She stepped aside as he continued, 'I was there at

the beginning of his life, and I certainly don't intend to be there —'

But when he knelt beside Arthur, he saw the light slip from his eyes.

And he knew.

'— at its end,' he said with a defeated sigh.

viii.

Merlin tried to look around, but he couldn't. All he could see was

whiteness, and all he could feel was cold, so much cold that it burrowed

down into his bones.

'Did you think it would be that simple?' came a mocking voice.

He wasn't able to turn his head. He was surrounded by ice, frozen in

place in a solid column of it. A woman stepped into view and gave him a

mocking, disdainful glare. 'Did you truly think that simply relocating me to

a distant land would be sufficient to dispose of Morgaine? Your mercy is

your undoing, Merlin, as mercy so often is.'

He tried to speak, tried to reply, but he couldn't move his mouth.

36

'You will stay here for eternity, Merlin. You will not die, no. No, my

magicks have seen to that. You will stay here, bound forever, and you

will always know that it was Morgaine the Sunkiller who brought you low.'

The glacial chill worked its way into the remote control that he had

hidden in his sleeve. It sputtered out and died, releasing — thousands of

miles away — the other Time Lord who walked the planet.

'Farewell, Merlin,' crowed Morgaine. 'We shall ne'er meet again.'

And with that triumphant, and only partly correct declaration,

Morgaine the Sunkiller vanished, leaving Merlin to scream silently within

his own head until such time as Earth's arctic climes were reduced to

melted water.

ix.

'I'm sorry.'

It seemed to the Doctor that he had repeated that phrase a hundred

times... first to Guinevere, then to the corpse of the King, then to empty

space. None of it did a bit of good.

Arthur lay upon the slab in the TARDIS belonging to the departed

Merlin. The Doctor didn't know what had happened to him, and didn't particularly care, although he had a sneaking suspicion that Morgaine had something to do with it. His own TARDIS was standing a few feet away.

'She's going to come looking for you,' the Doctor told Arthur. 'They all will. They'll pursue you using the technology that my opponent foolishly introduced into this realm. But I can delay that. I can help foster the legend, at least for a time. And in the end, when dust comes to dust... isn't that all we have left to us? Our legacy?'

He activated the machinery and the vessel around him hummed and vibrated in a manner very different from his own TARDIS, yet comfortingly similar. When it finally ceased, he knew precisely where he was. Deep underground near Lake Vortigern.

In another time.

In another realm.

That was where this TARDIS had shifted them. That was, apparently, Merlin's method of operation. To enter realities and mess with them, creating splinter realms, just so he could entertain himself.

But now the Doctor had brought the fallen king to Earth. To his Earth. To Avalon, he supposed. The truth of the matter was that he would far rather not have done so. He knew that Excalibur would serve as a beacon to Morgaine and her ilk. That they would travel through time and space itself, seeking Arthur. And Ancelyn would show up as well, no

doubt through the use of other technology that Merlin had brought into

the world. Or perhaps he would steal the means from Morgaine and Mordred themselves. Anything was possible; Ancelyn was a very resourceful young man.

As for the Doctor, he had no choice in his next actions. Free will was all well and good, but there were aspects of destiny that were already

written, and the Doctor had no choice in such instances save to serve as

co-author.

Speaking of writing...

He pulled out a notepad and paper and scribbled a letter to himself.

Dear Doctor, The King died in final battle. Everything else propaganda.

He signed *The Doctor* with a flourish. Then, after a moment of hesitation, recalling the circumstances in which — during his previous incarnation — he would discover the note, he added, *P.S. Morgaine has just seized control of the nuclear missile.* Then he laid the note on the unmoving body of Arthur.

He prepared to take his own TARDIS to the surface where he would then inscribe runes that translated as 'dig hole here.' But before he did so, he rested a hand on Arthur's cold face, and said softly, 'The King is dead. Long live... the King.'

And then the only sound in the chamber was that of the blue police box fading from sight. After that, there was nothing remaining but silence.

38

The Slave War

Una McCormack

An adventure of the Second Doctor, with Ben, Polly and Jamie

Bruttium, 71 B.C.E.

Polly was tired and thirsty, but she had reached the top of the ridge before Ben and that nearly made up for the morning's trek. Not what she'd hoped for when the TARDIS landed. 'Italy,' the Doctor had said, decisively, when Jamie asked where they were this time. 'Sometime in the past, I think. Or possibly the future. It does rather depend on where you stand...' Italy. Polly had been thrilled. Now she was glad simply to stop walking.

Jamie whistled. 'Look at that!'

Polly stared across the sunburnt fields to a great yellow villa. She thought longingly of cool courtyards, icy water, perhaps a little light pasta. When Ben caught up, Polly said, 'Civilization. Shall we knock on the door and say hello?'

Ben wiped his forehead. 'Good idea! Doctor?'

The Doctor — small and erratic and more than a little untidy — came

to a halt. 'Perhaps.' He peered at the villa and caught his breath. 'Yes, why not?'

At once, Jamie started down the path. Ben, grinning, offered Polly his hand. 'Come on, Duchess, you'll make it!'

The cheek. Polly snorted — but took his hand.

The path branched, and the companions took the way leading to the villa. As they drew closer, the Doctor checked his pace. Jamie bristled. 'Something's wrong.'

'What makes you say that, Jamie?'

'Well, it's awfully quiet,' Jamie said. 'Even for a hot afternoon.' He gestured ahead. 'And underneath those columns, that door's standing ajar.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said slowly, 'and nobody has come out to greet us.'

'Is that smoke?' Ben asked.

Cautiously, they came to the front of the house. ‘No, nobody to meet us,' the Doctor said. 'Or send us on our way. Perhaps we *should* look inside. Polly,' he gave her a winning smile, 'why don't you wait here?'

As the others went in, Polly sat on a low wall, wrapping her arms around two columns and letting her legs dangle. A few minutes passed,

then a few more. The varnish on her toenails had chipped.

'Oh, this is ridiculous!' Polly jumped down, pushed the door open — and gasped at the courtyard hidden within.

It was everything she wanted from her first Roman villa. High walls

draped in greenery made the space shady and secluded; sunlight

dappled the plants and statues, and a fountain bubbled softly to itself.

Polly, drawn to the cooling water, walked over and then saw a door in the

far wall. Hearing familiar voices beyond, she called out quietly to warn

her friends of her approach. But before she could go through, Ben came

out and barred the way. 'Don't go in there.'

Whyever not?' Polly tried to peer over his shoulder, but Jamie was

there, blocking her view. They *always* did this... 'What's going on? Are

you all right, Ben? You look awfully pale.'

'I was right about the smoke,' Ben said, which wasn't an answer. 'It's

been torched. And inside — '

'Inside,' Jamie said, 'you'll find the laird of the house and his lady.'

Ben had his hand on her shoulder. 'Honest, Pol, it's not a pretty sight.'

He led her back to the atrium, where they waited in silence. Polly stared

at the statues. It was not so pleasant here now, less a haven than a

mausoleum.

At last the Doctor reappeared. 'Time we were on our way.'

'But what about those people?' Polly said.

'Nothing we can do for them,' Ben said, bluntly.

'And I for one would rather not linger to be mistaken for whichever

savages did this,' the Doctor said — which, Polly had to admit, did

tend

to happen a lot.

They hurried back along the other path, down into the valley. 'More

smoke,' Ben muttered. 'Look, Pol, over there.' There were shouts, too,

from the same direction.

Three men came over the ridge at great pace. As one sped past,

Polly caught a glimpse of leather armour, a tattered red cloak, a smear of

blood upon his face. Soldiers. 'Get off the road!' one of them yelled.

'They're coming!'

'Who's coming?' Ben shouted after them.

'Savages! They'll kill you!'

The Doctor turned to his companions. 'Well,' he said brightly, clasping

his hands together in front of him, 'that certainly sounds unappealing. So

what shall we do? Shall we carry on our way? Or shall we follow the

advice of those gentlemen and...' he looked down the road. Polly could

hear more people coming, many more people.

'Run!' yelled the Doctor, and Polly obeyed. She turned on her heel

and was off like a champion.

She sprinted towards a clump of trees she'd spotted a few hundred

yards away. *Left the boys standing again,* she thought, wickedly. *Polly,*

old girl, you'll deserve more than a glass of water when this is all over.

She reached cover first, Jamie a close second. Eventually Ben fell down

next to them. 'There's a bloody great battle! — ooh, sorry, Pol, pardon

my French — a battle going on back there!' His eyes were shining, and Polly couldn't tell if it was excitement or fear.

Jamie peered around. 'Did anyone see which way the Doctor headed?'

The three companions stared at each other. 'So we're only down one

man,' Ben said. 'But he's the one with the time machine.'

Polly peeped out past the trees. 'Right now...' she murmured. 'What's that, Duchess?'

She didn't get to answer before two men crashed through the trees. Both were fresh from the battle, filthy, and grasping short swords. Polly

nodded in satisfaction. 'Right now is when we should be getting captured.'

Demetrius put down his stylus and rested his eyes. It was late, and the day had been long and violent. But when he looked over the tablet,

even he could see that the last lines were so cramped they could not be

read. Demetrius fumbled for a new tablet and started copying the message out again. His hand trembled at first, but he forced it to be still.

Done, and his master had not yet started calling for him, thankfully. Demetrius gathered up his work and hurried out into the evening,

keeping to the shadows, his head down, making for his master's tent.

Through the smoke and gloom, he could tell the camp was still in uproar.

The *dominus* was a big man who always filled whatever space there

was. Right now, he was pacing up and down, poring over the dispatches.

His face was no longer scarlet, but Demetrius knew from experience the

dominus was still angry. As he drew closer, his master held out his hand.

Demetrius passed over the tablets and the *dominus* walked as he read.

In the silence, Demetrius grabbed the chance to rest his eyes again,

offering a prayer to any god that might care to grant him some mercy

tonight.

Someone, somewhere, heard him. 'Better,' the *dominus* grunted. 'I

can read it now.'

Before he could speak further, there was a bustle outside. Demetrius

looked up to see two figures enter the tent. One was the *optio* who liked

to entertain himself by sticking his leg out and tripping Demetrius up. The

other was a stranger — a small man; not a soldier so far as Demetrius

could tell. The *dominus* threw down the hard-worked tablets. 'What is it

now?'

The *optio* gave a sharp salute. 'Sir. Found him at the edge of the

camp, sir. He requested an audience. Sir.'

'Who in hell does he think he is — Dis himself?'

Demetrius faded into a corner, bowing his head so it would seem he

was not listening. But he watched from the corner of his eye as the small

man approached the *dominus*.

'Nothing so striking, although I'm sure you can see that already. Just

an ordinary traveller who lost his way, glad now to find himself among

fellow citizens, and eager to pay his respects and ask the protection of ..

I'm sorry, I don't believe I caught your name?' Demetrius winced on the

fellow's behalf. A talker. The *dominus* wouldn't be amused, not today.

Sure enough, his master was drawing himself up to his full height. 'I

am Marcus Licinius Crassus. Proconsul of Rome.'

The little man clapped his hands together. 'How splendid! I say, isn't

that a stroke of luck? Not to mention the honour, of course, which could

almost go unsaid but I'm sure will prove worth saying anyway.'

Demetrius almost laughed out loud. He had to force his face back to

its required passivity. The *dominus*, meanwhile, had entirely missed the

gibe and was even looking pleased. 'I'm gratified you've heard my name,'

he said. *And he is too, the dog — the vile and stupid dog*, Demetrius

thought, with that sudden black rage that still sometimes rose up in him,

no matter how hard he tried to suppress it.

'But I remain in the dark as to *your* name,' the *dominus* said.

'Yes, of course — I'm Gaius Iunius Faber, and...' He looked around, rubbing his hands together, seeming for a moment to be rather lost. 'Yes, well, I did have a number of young friends travelling with me, but I appear to have misplaced them. I must say, I would rather like to find them...'

'Faber, eh?' The *dominus* was pondering the new arrival through half-closed eyes. 'Citizen, you said?'

'Oh yes. Indeed.'

'Travelling to?'

‘To Rome. From Rhegium.'

Crassus whistled. 'A long trip to make in troubled times. And on troubled roads.'

'And much as I would prefer to remain in the comfort of my own, ah, modest home, the journey had to be made, alas. My sister's husband died last month and while the will disposes of the property, I'd like my pick before she frees them all.' Faber waved his hand. ‘I'm sure you understand.'

Slave trader, Demetrius thought dispiritedly. The *dominus* nodded his sympathy. 'Business is business, eh?' Crassus contemplated the man some more, and then a smile curled across his lips. Something about Faber had clearly taken his fancy — the flattery, Demetrius imagined, although nobody round here, slave or free, would complain if it put their master in a better temper.

'All right, Faber,' Crassus said, 'you're under my protection. Stay until your friends turn up, although I wouldn't hold out much hope of that —

pack of dogs, that lot, animals. Two legions torn to shreds today — good

men, all of them. A waste — and more still to come.' He sighed, and nodded at the *optio*. 'Marius here will show you somewhere you can wash and rest.' Then, on a whim, he gestured at Demetrius. 'Take that one with you if you like,' the *dominus* said, off-handedly generous. 'A scribe — well, that's what I paid for, but I won't give a brass piece to that

bandit Florus again. You can get a decent enough hand from him, though, and whatever else you want he'll provide.'

Faber was beside himself with gratitude — far more than the goods deserved, Demetrius himself would admit that. 'Well, how gracious of you!' Faber exclaimed. 'How generous! Does he, ah, have a name?'

The *dominus* peered at Demetrius, who prudently studied the ground. 'I forget,' Crassus said. ‘If I ever knew. Something Greek, no doubt. He

can tell you himself if you ask.'

This was not the usual kind of capture, Polly thought. The bigger man wiped his knife on his tunic, shoved it back into his belt, then offered Polly his hand, pulling her to her feet. ‘Up you get!'

The other, smaller man sheathed his knife less willingly. 'Where did you come from?'

'The villa back up the hill,' Ben said, which was true so far as it went.

The two men exchanged a look. 'You just got away then,' said the big man. 'Bad bit of business, that. Soldiers looted the place, first chance they had.' He eyed Polly appreciatively. 'They'll blame that on us!'

The other man looked sour. 'I don't doubt they will.'

'What are you going to do to us?' Polly said.

'Not going to do anything,' the man said cheerfully. 'Battle's over — the thing to do now is get back to camp, have a bite to eat, drop to drink — ' 'Now that's music to my ears!' Polly laughed.

'Then you're free to go on your way.'

His friend frowned. 'Not quite...'

'Ah yes, of course. I always forget.'

I knew there'd be a catch, Polly thought, but the big man grinned at her. 'Don't worry your head. You'll be free to go, soon enough. But first — you'll be seeing the Boss and the Lady.'

The Boss and the Lady. Polly heard it again and again throughout the rest of the day. Their guides-cum-guards led them off cross country at a fast pace, passing many other fighters heading in the same direction. To these, they said the same thing. *Taking them to see the Boss. Taking them to see the Lady.*

In the early evening they reached the edge of a large, lively camp. People rushed to greet the returning soldiers and hear the news. Polly

saw plenty of women, and children too, running about or peeping out behind the adults. Cooking fires had been lit. It was a small town of tents, buzzing with excitement and laughter. 'Whoever was in that battle,' Jamie whispered, 'I reckon we're with the winners.'

They halted by a tent indistinguishable from the rest. The smaller man waited outside, and the big one took them in. Polly saw a few makeshift chairs, a table, and a bed onto which someone's armour had been tossed — that someone, she guessed, being the man stretched out asleep on the ground, snoring. A woman sat at the table. As the companions entered, she rose to greet them. Polly, looking closely at her, thought that perhaps they were about the same age, although this woman — with worry lines and brown hair streaked with grey — might easily be taken for much older.

'Found them by that villa they burned,' their guide said. 'Friendly enough, but you never can tell, eh?'

'True enough,' the woman said. 'Thank you. Get yourself some food, now. Some sleep.'

He nodded and left. The woman looked at each of the companions in

turn. Polly tried to seem friendly; Jamie smiled. Ben blushed and looked away. The woman smiled then too, very slightly.

'Welcome,' she said. 'There's no need to be afraid. You're safe here.

My name is Calpurnia. And this sleeping dog...' She stepped towards the

man flat out on the floor, and dug her toe gently but effectively into his

ribs. 'Juno save us — he's Spartacus.'

So the day was ending with a new master, but Demetrius held out

little hope that Faber would be an improvement. He would be like all

small men, bullied by bigger men, taking it out on whoever was in his

power and at hand.

The *optio* led them to a tent on the edge of camp. It was small, but

away from the worst of the noise and smoke. Demetrius set to work,

trying to make it comfortable, all the while keeping an eye on Faber. The

new *dominus* was holding the flap of the tent open, looking out.

Demetrius lit the lamp, spread some cushions out on the couch, and

poured out water for washing and wine in a cup he found lying around.

He was standing ready, offering the drink when Faber at last turned

round.

Faber didn't take it. Instead, he stood looking at Demetrius. All the

nervous energy had disappeared. Faber seemed to have turned into a

completely different man. Demetrius was reminded sharply of something

his master had said. *Dis himself.* He shivered, and dropped his eyes

from Faber's face.

'Tell me,' Faber said, quietly, 'what's your name?'

'Demetrius, *domine.* '

'Well, Demetrius, I'm more than able to pour my own wine, so why don't you keep that cup, sit down, and drink it yourself?'

Demetrius blinked. ‘ *Domine?* '

'Faber will do.'

That had to be a trick. Surely, if he used Faber's name, he'd be whipped? But Faber was looking back at him quite calmly. 'Give it a try,'

he suggested.

Demetrius got as far as opening his mouth. 'I can't. *Domine,* please — ' 'It's really very easy.'

'I can't.'

Mercifully, Faber stopped pressing. 'We'll leave that for the moment then,' he said. 'But at the very least, in here — not *domine*.'

Demetrius nodded slowly. He felt tired suddenly, and ancient, much more than his three-and-twenty years.

'Please, do sit down,' Faber said, as if Demetrius were a welcome guest. He sank gratefully into the cushions, still clutching the cup in both

hands. He watched Faber pour himself wine, and then take the stool opposite. 'Well,' said Faber, raising his cup and smiling, 'to your very good health!'

They both drank, deeply. Demetrius felt some of the day's strain — his master's savage temper, the errors he had been unable to hide, this

strange turn of fortune — begin to lessen. The wine helped; he didn't taste wine often. He took another rapid mouthful.

'Two legions,' Faber said. 'That's why the proconsul was angry, yes?'

Demetrius nodded.

'Go on.'

'They weren't meant to have engaged the enemy. Master gave orders not to — I wrote those out, that's how I know. But Mummius — commanding the legions — must have thought he'd get one over the *dominus*. Sent them right in.' Demetrius gulped down some more wine and Faber signalled that he should continue. 'A disaster. Down in the kitchens they were saying that some of the soldiers were throwing down

their weapons — running off the field!' He just about held in a laugh. 'I

swear by Juno herself, I've never seen the *dominus* so angry.'

'I imagine that he doesn't much enjoy defeat.'

'What, the glorious Crassus?' Demetrius did laugh then, very slightly, and heard a note of hysteria. 'He's a man of great schemes, great ambitions. Wants to make his name live on forever, does Crassus. And what have those two legions done? Made him the empire's prize fool. There'll be hell to pay in the morning.' Demetrius shuddered, and gestured to ward off the thought.

Faber didn't reply. Demetrius looked at him fearfully. Had he spoken too freely? Too late now. He drained his cup while he had the chance.

'So,' said Faber, after a moment's thought. 'Here we are, in southern Italy, almost the heart of the empire, and legions under the command of a consul himself have been defeated in battle. Tell me, Demetrius — who exactly is Crassus fighting?'

But that was another name a slave didn't dare say out loud, even with his tongue this loose. That way led to the cross, for sure. 'You know... the bandits.'

'Bandits?'

'You know what I mean...'

'Let's assume I don't.'

'But you must know!' Demetrius burst out. He struggled to contain himself. 'The ones that have kept the south in turmoil for two years, so there's hardly a safe road down here. The ones who've had all the big farms in chaos, and left the villas standing empty. The ones that sent two consuls packing and now have made a third look as much an ass as Midas!' That sounded far too much like triumph. 'I'm sorry, *domine*, forgive me, please —'

Faber waved his hand to quiet him. 'You can speak freely,' he said, and for a brief, mad second Demetrius was sure he was laughing too. 'Only do remember — it's Faber, if you must call me something. But not *domine*.'

They sat in silence for a while. Demetrius, his panic over, felt his heart

slow. 'A long day,' Faber said, calmly. He stood up and Demetrius

jumped up too. 'For both of us. But I might go and see what the stars can

tell me.' He pushed back the flap of the tent, and Demetrius picked a

spot on the ground where he might sleep after Faber's return. 'Don't wait

up on my account,' Faber said, as he went out. 'And do use the couch.'

Spartacus, in Polly's opinion, was a bit of a dish. Nothing like Kirk

Douglas — this Spartacus had long dark hair, a wicked look in his eye,

and sprawled in his chair like it couldn't quite contain him. He winked at

her at one point, and she had to smile at the teenage flutter in her heart.

Moments later, though, he was winking at Jamie.

Ben repeated the story about coming from the villa and getting caught

up in the battle. Nothing he said was an outright lie, but Polly was

anxious, particularly when she looked at Calpurnia. The woman listened

with a frown throughout. When Ben finished, Spartacus turned to her.

'Well?'

Calpurnia's reply lay somewhere between affection and exasperation.

'Well what?'

'You're the wits behind this, so everyone tells me. What do you think?'

Calpurnia sighed. 'It sounds convincing. Slaves at the villa, took the

chance to run when the soldiers turned up. Showed some sense there,

I'll grant you — those Roman dogs wouldn't have been kind.' Her eye fell

on Polly. 'All they've said is true.'

Spartacus gave a single, short nod, and turned back to the

companions. 'There you are — the Lady's spoken. You're free to go.' He

unfolded from his chair, and for some reason Polly felt compelled to

stand up with him. Ben and Jamie stood too.

'But the roads are dangerous now,' Spartacus said. 'And you're most

welcome — to stay, if you like, and join us.' One by one he clasped their

hands. 'Eat with us tonight, at least. It will be the best meal of your life.

Rebels eat better than slaves, and we drink to freedom.'

I think I'd die for you, Polly thought, in a daze. When she looked at

Ben, she could tell he was thinking the same thing.

The rebels that night were jubilant. Wine flowed, and a whole flock of

sheep seemed to have been sacrificed to celebrate their victory. There

was music and dancing, and someone was giving out garlands woven

from vines and ivy. Most people wore them on their heads, but Polly had

hers on her arm. The companions filled their bowls and cups, and

gathered around a camp fire.

Ben brought Jamie up to speed between mouthfuls of bread and

stew. 'We're in the middle of a rebellion. Roman slaves, taking on their

masters. Cracking stuff.'

Polly elbowed him. 'I didn't know you had a classical background.'

'Hey!' Ben elbowed her back. 'My school didn't cost as much as yours, but I saw the film!'

Polly crinkled her nose at him. 'Me too. I slept through Latin.' She looked around the camp. The music was speeding up and her heart raced with it. ‘I'd like to help, though.'

Ben took another bite of stew and nodded. 'Me too. Jamie?'

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Jamie had been watching the dancing. 'Eh?'

'Shall we stay and help?'

Jamie rolled round to face him. 'Aye, well.' He looked unhappy. 'I think I'd rather find the Doctor, get back to the TARDIS, and be on our way. Fast as we can.'

Polly stared at him in amazement, but Ben spoke first. ‘I'd have thought of all of us, you'd be the one who'd want to help.'

'Then maybe you'd be wrong,' Jamie said. 'All this — it can't turn out well. Believe me. I've seen it before.'

'It might be different this time,' Polly said.

'I don't think so, Polly,' Jamie looked at them both in turn. 'You two,' he said, shaking his head, 'you don't know. Your world — it's nothing like this. I tell you, when this is over, and it will be soon enough, it'll be ten times worse than... than what happened in that villa.'

'The Doctor would want us to do something,' Polly started, but Ben put his hand on her arm and shook his head.

'How about we find him and ask?' Jamie said, and then he seemed to give up. 'Oh, what's the use? We'll stay, I know — but I won't have you saying I didn't warn you.' He got up. 'I'm off for some sleep.'

Ben put down his bowl. 'You know, Polly, he might have a point. You remember the end, don't you? All those crosses along the road.'

'Don't be ridiculous! The Doctor wouldn't let that happen. Anyway, that was just a stupid film.'

'I know my schooling was free, Duchess, but I don't remember people talking about the Roman Revolution like they talk about the French Revolution. Liberty, equality and all the rest of it. We can't change history, Pol. We know how this is going to end.'

Polly clutched her garland to her. 'We *don't* know. Not for certain. Besides, it wouldn't matter to the Doctor. So it shouldn't matter to us.'

Ben eyed her thoughtfully. 'Got to you, didn't he? Spartacus.'

'He got to you too.'

'Yeah. Maybe.' Ben stared at the fire. 'All right, Duchess. I'm in.'

All around, the music pulsed on. Polly stretched out on the ground and twisted the leaves on her garland. 'The Doctor will find us. But while we're here, how could we stand and watch? How could we?'

Demetrius woke after more sleep than he'd had in an age. There was no sign of Faber. Outside, it was miserable, a grey mist covering

everything. Autumn had come. He rubbed his arms to warm himself, and

seized the rare chance to rest further. But he had only a few minutes

before a message arrived from Crassus, and he was obliged to go in

search of the strange new *dominus*.

The camp was hushed. The soldiers worked in silence, the slaves

with more than usual fear. Upon the ridge overlooking the camp —

positioned so that the spectacle would always be in view — Crassus was

having fifty survivors of the two defeated legions crucified.

Demetrius found Faber watching the whole business unfold. The

stench of blood and wet wood was terrible, as was the ceaseless

hammering, but worst were the pleading and the screams. Faber stood

very still. Demetrius, turning his head from the sight, addressed him in a

whisper. 'The proconsul sends word. You are expected to dine with him

this evening.'

Faber swung round. Demetrius flinched — but no blow came.

Instead, Faber drew in a breath. It was odd how so small a man could fill

up so much space. 'The proconsul's stomach is made of stern stuff,'

Faber said, ‘if he can order this and still be thinking of his dinner.'

Demetrius was confused. How else would Crassus get the

legionnaries to face the rebels again, if not by making them more afraid

of him than of their enemy? How else would he ensure their obedience?

'This is a terrible death,' Faber said.

'A slave's death,' Demetrius agreed, and then once again had to pull back from the ferocity of Faber's reaction.

'What could you possibly mean by that?' Faber cried.

Now Demetrius was thoroughly bewildered. Who was this man exactly? He seemed to understand nothing of what bound the world together. 'Please, *domine*, I mean, it's shameful for a Roman to go that way. A slave expects no better.'

Faber's arm rose, and Demetrius was sure this time he would feel it. But the hand came to rest upon his shoulder, and Faber turned him, gently but firmly, to face him. 'Now look at me,' Faber ordered, and Demetrius obeyed. 'Nobody should die like that,' Faber told him. 'Slave?

Free? It's all in the mind, Demetrius. It's a choice we make.' Fine words,

Demetrius thought, staring back and shivering — but what those men were feeling right now wasn't in the mind, for sure. And what choice was

it that brought you to an end like that?

'Now,' Faber said, and to Demetrius's eternal gratitude led him away,

'Crassus. What are we to do about Crassus?'

Polly woke with a crown of leaves and a hangover. All around, the camp slept on, exhausted. The morning was misty and cool, and the fires

had died down. Polly put her garland on the ground and stretched.

Where had the boys got to?

'May I sit down?' Calpurnia had slipped in beside her.

'Of course.' Polly managed a tired smile.

Calpurnia picked up the garland. 'Vines,' she said, 'are sacred to

Bacchus. God of disorder. Lord of misrule. Many of us here owe our lives

to vines. Back at the start, we camped on Vesuvius. The Romans laid

siege, and we thought we were finished. But we wove ropes from vines,

and climbed down the back way, and took them by surprise.' She began

to pick the garland apart. 'And we killed every last one of them.'

Polly shuddered.

'Good idea, the vines,' Calpurnia said. 'It wasn't mine. I'm not the only

one with wits, whatever he says. No, that was down to Crixus. He was

brilliant like that.'

'Crixus?' Polly had heard that name several times the previous night.

'He was with us right at the start. A Gaul. Another gladiator, like

Spartacus.'

'What happened?' Polly asked quietly.

Calpurnia frowned at her work. 'In the end, Polly, he couldn't bear

wandering any more. He simply wanted to go home. We all took a vote,

and most of the Gauls chose to go back home with him. So he led

them

off, and the Romans went after them, and this time the Romans did all

the killing.' The garland now lay in pieces in her lap. 'Two thousand of

them. It's not how I wanted to win my place in Spartacus's arms, but it's

how it happened.'

'I'm sorry,' Polly said.

Calpumia did not answer. She chose a few of the disentangled vines

and began to thread them together. 'Tell me, Polly, did you three really

come from that villa?'

'We had just been there,' Polly answered. 'But before that... No.

We've all come from much further away.'

Calpurnia nodded. 'I was sure there was more to your story. I thought

you might be a young *domina* from that villa. Those two young men, they

stand in front of you like they're sworn to protect you, like they're your

slaves. We've had spies come amongst us before, and I'm not one to

overlook a woman.' She gave Polly a wry smile.

'None of us were slaves, either,' Polly said.

'No?' Calpumia kept on threading. 'Well, I'm glad you've told me the

truth. We're nothing, you see, if we don't trust each other.'

'For what it's worth, we want to help,' Polly said. 'In any way we can.'

'Thank you. I'm grateful.'

They sat in silence for a while as Calpurnia carried on with her

weaving. 'What happens now?' Polly asked. 'Now you've won?'

'Won?' Calpurnia laughed. 'Oh, they'll send more soldiers after us,

soon enough. More and more.'

‘So what do you *want* to do?'

Calpumia thought about the question as she worked. 'Back at the

start, you know, what we wanted to do was go the length and breadth of

Italy, and tell every slave we met they could be free, like us. And we've

done that. But now? Now, I'm tired. We're all tired. And I find myself

thinking that maybe Crixus was right. That what we need is a home.

What I want, Polly...' She glanced around. Others were stirring. She

lowered her voice, speaking with quiet urgency. 'If I could have my way

I'd take us over to Sicily. I've heard they're friendly to runaways there.

And I think the Romans might just leave us in peace, if we weren't here,

in Italy itself. We could have a home there, a real home.' She gave a

short laugh. 'But how would we do that? We can all fight, yes; those who

weren't gladiators learned, we had to. But before all this — we were

herders, Polly, field hands, floor scrubbers. Prostitutes.'

She finished her weaving, and tied the new bracelet around Polly's

wrist. 'There. Now you won't lose it. Yes, I'd take us to Sicily, Polly. But I

might as well want to take us to the ends of the world. Not one of us

knows a thing about ships.'

'Ships?' Polly cried. 'Is that all that's stopping you?'

Calpumia looked at her sharply.

'There's Ben! My friend, Ben. He's a sailor!'

Crassus was drunk, but tonight Demetrius's place was behind Faber and given how little the man was eating, it hardly counted as work. All Faber himself had to do was lie there and listen. When Crassus was drunk he became a bore.

'Mummius.' Crassus spat on the floor. 'His father's father was a slave. I should have known better. Bad blood.'

Faber examined an oyster shell. 'It must be hard to find men to live up to you.'

'Eh, well, Pompey's taken the best of the legions off to Spain. They get fat and he gets rich. So much for honour, eh?'

Pompey. If Demetrius had been given a coin every time he'd heard his master rage about Pompey, he would have bought his own freedom by now. Crassus loathed his fellow consul, envying his wealth, his success, and most of all his youth.

‘Dis knows,' the master said, 'all a man wants to do is to serve the Republic, earn something to keep him in his old age. And what does he get? Bandits in Bruttium. Where's the money in that? The men turn to looting, and who can blame them, eh?' He sent the dish of snails Faber's

way. 'I swear by Mars himself, I'll see every one of these dogs dead, down to their last whelp.'

Demetrius, bending to fill Faber's glass, misjudged it. Wine splashed on the table. As Demetrius mopped it up, Faber gave him an encouraging smile. Crassus winked at him. 'Greek boy's taken your fancy, eh? Perhaps you should make me an offer.'

'Perhaps I should. But tell me, a man of your talents — surely you have something spectacular in mind for these rogues?'

Crassus laughed bitterly. 'From your mouth to Jupiter's ear, friend! But the way Lady Fortune's been smiling on me of late, I'll do all the fighting and Pompey will turn up and get the credit.' He snapped his fingers for more wine, and when it came drank heavily.

'Now it seems to me...' Faber stopped, dismissing whatever thought he'd had with a wave of his hand. ‘No, I'm sure, if it was possible, you would be doing it already.'

Crassus looked blearily at him. 'What?'

'Oh, nothing, really...'

‘Go on, man, say your piece!'

'Simply, it seems to me you have them at your mercy.' Faber reached for a knife. 'Let me show you. Here's Bruttium, yes? The toe.' He put down the knife. 'And here's the length of Italy, yes?' Another knife went

down at an angle to the first one.

'Juno's... I know what Italy looks like!'

'Of course, of course! Now, here,' Faber held up an olive, then balanced it on the first knife, 'is the bandit's army. And, up here...'

Demetrius slyly offered him the dish of olives.

'Thank you! Yes, here,' Faber took one and placed it on the second knife, 'are the legions under your command. What you must do is stop the bandits entering Italy again. It's been at their mercy far too long. So what you need — another knife, Demetrius, if you would be so kind — is this.'

Faber placed the third knife across the first two. Crassus stared at them, and the olives, then shook his head. 'Not following you.'

'A wall, Crassus. Build a wall.'

'A wall?'

'Oh yes! The kind of feat,' Faber went on smoothly, 'that only Rome could achieve, and then only under the command of her very best men.'

Demetrius, not quite believing he was hearing this, glanced quickly at his master. Against all odds, Crassus was hanging on Faber's every word.

'Winter is coming,' Faber said, softly. 'Your troops will need to be kept busy and in order. And when the spring comes, and with it Spartacus...'

The way he said the name, it made the air quiver. Demetrius looked at the slave behind Crassus. He was now hanging on Faber's every word.

'In spring, Spartacus turns his forces north, and he will face all Rome's might. And he will have nowhere to go.'

Crassus stared at the knives again. Faber leaned in close. 'They'll talk about it for centuries,' he whispered. 'Crassus's Wall.'

Crassus swallowed. 'Truth is, something like this had already crossed my mind,' he said. The slave at his shoulder rolled his eyes upwards.

'Well!' Faber leaned back and beamed. 'That's settled! And how magnificent — Pompey, I'm sure, would never dream of anything like it.

And may I say too it will be a privilege to watch it happen.' Faber reached for the uppermost of the olives, and popped it into his mouth. 'How often, after all, does one see history made?'

Faber was silent as they walked back to the tent. Demetrius had a thousand questions, but would not speak first. ‘Go on,' Faber said, at last. 'You want to ask me something.'

'A wall? Across Italy? It's madness!'

'Yet it seems to have caught the proconsul's imagination.'

'It'll bog down his legions — tire them out — come the spring they'll be exhausted. And stuck defending it — lose all their flexibility.'

Demetrius lit the lamp and Faber poured the wine. 'Even if it were possible, it's a terrible error, for sure!'

Faber handed him a cup. 'You'd think someone as grand and as clever as Crassus would think of that, wouldn't you?' He smiled into his

wine.

'The Senate would never allow it!'

'What can they do?'

'But — a wall? It would cede the south to the rebels! The mob would never allow it!'

'Wouldn't they? Does their influence reach this far?'

Demetrius strained his darkening eyes to read Faber's face. 'Then Pompey wouldn't allow it. And he has his legions!'

‘Ah. Now that is a point.' Faber's eyes sparkled in the torchlight. 'But how would Pompey find out? I can't see Crassus writing to ask his permission. It will be your master's very own piece of foolishness.'

'Oh!' Demetrius put down his cup and sat heavily on the couch. 'Oh no. You shouldn't speak like this. I... should not have heard. My master...'

He stood again. 'I must go, right now, and tell him. If he works it out, when he works it out, and I haven't told him, I'll be...' He gestured out beyond the tent where the crosses still carried their burdens.

Faber, opposite, said nothing.

Demetrius fell to his knees. ' *Domine,* please, if I was yours, I couldn't tell him then, if you ordered me not to. And he did say, didn't he, to make

him an offer...?'

But Faber was shaking his head. 'I don't deal in flesh, Demetrius.'

Demetrius, in despair, hid his face in his hands.

'Crassus,' Faber said, after a while, sounding thoughtful, 'does not strike me as an enlightened master. No,' he pressed on, 'Crassus thinks of slaves as tools that happen to talk. But what happens when the tool's broken, Demetrius? What use do you think people like Crassus have for a scribe who's gone blind?'

It was true, of course, but Demetrius had not dared think that word, never mind say it out loud.

'Perhaps,' Faber said, gently, 'now that you've heard it said, you can accept it? It isn't over yet. We could do something about it.'

Demetrius stared at the blur of his fingers. It was worse than it had been at the start of the summer, however often he had told himself otherwise. 'What are you going to do, Demetrius?' Faber asked.

Demetrius rubbed his face dry. 'What do you want me do? What, after all, can I do?' He looked up at last at the other man, who was leaning forwards in his seat, and holding out a stylus.

'Take a letter,' Faber said.

* * *

When Polly and Calpurnia approached Ben, he grinned and said, 'Boats to Sicily? No problem. A fine old naval tradition should do the trick — pay someone to do it for you. There's enough gold here to sink a fleet, never mind sail it.' After some debate, it was decided he and Jamie would ride south, taking with them fifty others and a pile of the rebels'

spoils.

Polly followed on foot with the main body of the company. Spartacus rode out at the front, but Calpurnia walked amongst the rest, listening to them. Most were relieved, she told Polly; like her they were tired of fighting and longing for somewhere to call home.

The journey took almost a fortnight, over rough bare ground, the

weather turning colder as they marched. The land was silent. The few villas stood empty of masters and slaves alike, and the scouts reported the countryside had cleared before them. 'Where we go, the legions always follow,' Calpurnia told Polly. 'And they're right to flee from the legions.'

A day or two before they reached their destination, a rider was sighted on the road ahead. The company halted and a line of archers took position, but Polly, walking at the front with Calpurnia, cried out in delight.

'Jamie!' She rushed forwards to greet him. He jumped off his horse, and they hugged each other.

Jamie brought good news from Rhegium. Ben had bought the services of some men to ferry the company across the narrow strait to Sicily. Five ships in all, which Ben had pronounced seaworthy. He had put men on each to guarantee the deal would go ahead. Half the gold had been handed over already, Jamie said, with the rest to follow

when

they had all reached Sicily.

'That Ben now,' Jamie said in admiration. 'Who would have thought he had it in him? Any chance of a bite to eat, Polly?'

Polly would have served him peacock on a gold plate if she could, but he had to make do with bread and cheese. Wolfing down mouthfuls, Jamie explained what would happen next. 'We'll turn off the road before

we reach the town. There's a wee bay up along the coast where the boats are heading. We'll meet them there. Get these poor folk across and on their way.' He looked at Polly. 'And that's an end to it, aye? We can find the Doctor?'

Polly kissed him on the cheek. 'Yes, Jamie. That'll be the end of it.'

After another day of walking, they left the road. The ground beneath Polly's feet became sandy and, hearing the keening of gulls, her heart rose. Beside her, Calpurnia looked tired, but she was smiling. Down in the bay, as Jamie had promised, were five ships, bobbing up and down

on the waves. Polly gripped Calpurnia's hand and watched them. Watched them grow smaller. It took Jamie's shout of dismay to make her understand. 'The ships!' he cried, and began to run down towards them. 'The ships!'

Sure enough, and with a sinking heart, Polly watched the ships sail off down the strait. They were abandoned, stranded, with winter coming

and the wolves at their heels.

All that season, they worked and patrolled and danced, but Polly thought the music sounded melancholy, an echo of that first night. Calpurnia had aged, and Polly was afraid she was sick. Ben too looked drawn, blaming himself bitterly for the failure of his plan. 'They just took the money and ran, Duchess,' he kept repeating. 'Murdered the men I'd put on the boats. Threw their bodies overboard, like... so much rubbish. I didn't see that coming. Jamie was right. This isn't our world.'

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Winter ended, and with its passing the rebels turned back north. Not far from where they had last engaged the enemy, they halted. They took over a grand villa, camping in its deserted rooms and dishevelled gardens. From here, Spartacus sent out scouts to gather news of the legions. Despite Ben's protests, Polly joined Calpurnia on one of these expeditions, wanting to keep her close and share her burden. Besides, over the winter, Polly had learned to carry her bow confidently. Her authority among the rebels was growing.

The two women travelled quickly, and were soon within sight of one of the enemy encampments. What Polly saw confounded her.

The Romans had been hard at work throughout the winter. A deep ditch had been dug and, behind it, a wooden fence, seven feet or more,

had been raised. The whole thing stretched in either direction as far as

Polly could see. 'Juno save us,' Calpurnia whispered. 'They're putting up

a wall.'

The other scouts, Ben and Jamie among them, brought back the

same story. The ditch and fence crossed Bruttium, over thirty miles from

coast to coast, and in some parts it was already made of stone.

Spartacus received the reports in disbelief. 'A wall? Across Italy? These

Romans are crazy!'

'From what I saw, and from what the other scouts are saying,' Ben

said, 'I think we can still get through. They're stretched thin manning the

thing, never mind building more of it. But we'd have to move soon.'

Polly was watching Calpurnia. She was pacing around the edge of

the room, brushing her hand against the wall. Spartacus, too, had been

watching his wife. 'Calpurnia,' he prompted, gently.

Calpurnia looked out into the tranquil courtyard. 'I have been thinking

that Bruttium is as good a place as any. Left to it... Left to it, we could

find peace, like we hoped to find in Sicily. The land's dry, it would need

hard work, but we're all used to that.' She crossed to her husband and

took his hand. 'Aren't we?'

They stood, hand-in-hand, looking at each other. Spartacus broke

away first. ‘So Crassus wants a wall, eh? Very well, he can have his wall.

The Romans on one side, us on the other. So,' he said, 'we must send Crassus a message —'

'I'll go,' Ben said quickly. 'I'll take it.'

Spartacus contemplated Ben for a long while. Ben looked back with his chin raised and his hands folded behind his back — standing to attention, Polly realised.

Then Spartacus smiled, like sunlight. 'As you choose,' he said.

'If you're going, I'm coming with you,' Jamie said. The companions had gathered in the courtyard. Polly was drawing her hand through the

water in the pool.

Ben shook his head. ‘I'd rather you were here.'

'Oh come on, Ben!' Jamie said.

‘I'd rather you stayed here. Someone should be looking after Polly.'

Polly raised her eyes upwards. 'Ben, for heaven's sake —'

'You shouldn't be by yourself!' Ben said. 'Duchess, it's not right!'

'By herself?' Jamie was incredulous. 'She's got ten thousand armed rebels keeping her company! Besides this girl can look after herself.'

'Jamie,' Ben said, 'I might not be coming back.'

Polly started, splashing water from the pool. 'Ben!' she cried. 'Oh no!'

Jamie said. 'We'll not let you go! Not by yourself!'

Ben waved his hands to quiet them. 'Then I'll take someone else. But I'm not going to lose you two. Don't you understand? If I don't do

this... If

I don't do this, I don't think I could ever forgive myself.'

Demetrius did not see spring approach, but he felt the days get warmer, smelt the new green leaves, was the first to hear the birdsong start again. Faber had kept him close all winter, far from his master's attention, but Demetrius knew that with spring the end was coming. One evening, when Demetrius imagined the sky filled with stars, the messengers arrived. Faber, by now only a small dark shape, murmured,

'At last!' and hurried after them. Demetrius, forgotten, followed. Faber slipped through the camp, stopping close to Crassus's tent. Demetrius held back, cloaking himself in darkness. ‘Psst!' Faber hissed. 'Ben! Ben!'

Movement; then another voice, a young man's voice. 'Doctor!'

'There you are, Ben! You know, I rather thought you might turn up with the rebels... My dear boy! How are Polly and Jamie?'

'Fine, both fine — Doctor! Have you been here with the Romans all along?'

'What? Well, of course I have! Now listen, Ben, we don't have much time. It is absolutely vital you take a message to Spartacus. Tell him that

Pompey is on his way, do you hear? Pompey. My guess is he and his legions will arrive in... Oh, no more than two weeks. Do you understand?'

'But, Doctor, I've come with an offer of peace —'

'Peace? Oh, dear me no, Crassus won't be interested in peace! Once

he learns Pompey's on his way, he'll be after you. Ben, it is vital

Spartacus gets that message. Tell him to turn round and head south. Go

to Rhegium and get some ships. Get as many as you can across to

Sicily.' Faber sighed, sounding put out. 'I rather hoped that was what you

would do with the winter. I've gone to quite some lengths to keep

Crassus busy.'

'Doctor, we... I tried that already. It didn't work.'

There was a pause. 'I see. Well, that's that, isn't it?' Another pause.

'Then... you must get away. Get Jamie and Polly, and go directly to the

TARDIS.'

'But, Doctor, we've got an army! There's ten thousand of us, ready to

fight—'

'Ben, listen to me! It's finished. You may beat Crassus tomorrow, but

then Pompey will come, and after him there will be more and bigger

armies. Ten thousand? That's nothing to Rome. Ben, you know how this

ends. Did Spartacus win?'

The other man did not reply. Demetrius inched forwards.

'Well, did he?'

‘No, Doctor, he didn't.'

'Then there it is. Now.' There was a rustle of paper. 'This is where I'm

taking the TARDIS. Bring Jamie and Polly as soon as you can... Oh my

goodness, here comes that blessed *optio*... Ben, whatever Crassus says

now, there's nothing to be done, nothing. Get away, get as many as you

can away, up to the mountains. Good luck, Ben!'

Faber, coming back round the tent, crashed straight into Demetrius.

'Oh my giddy aunt! Demetrius! How do you keep yourself out of sight like

that?'

'It was a hard school,' Demetrius said. 'But I've learned all its lessons.'

He grasped the other man's wrist. 'You're leaving, aren't you? Aren't you,

Doctor?'

Spartacus heard Ben's news in silence. Outside, it was growing late.

‘So. Pompey.'

Calpurnia was already planning. 'We must get the children away.

They won't show any mercy. Split them into groups, send them out into

the mountains. Polly and I will arrange it.' She looked at Polly, who

nodded.

'Do it,' Spartacus said. 'I'll come out in a while, and speak.' As they

began to leave, Spartacus said, 'Ben, stay a moment.'

Polly glanced back over her shoulder as she left. 'It's going to be a

great fight,' Ben was saying. 'And your name — it'll never be forgotten.

It'll live on, right down through history.'

Spartacus threw back his head and laughed. 'Never thought of that.

Better than nothing, eh?

Spartacus spoke to the rebels. He reminded them that they had started out with kitchen knives, and now they had swords. He said how there had been only seventy of them, and now they were ten thousand strong. Then he leapt down from his horse and, with a shout, he sent it on its way. Tomorrow, he said, he would start the day standing beside them — and he would end it on a consul's horse. And when tomorrow was over, he told them, there would be the day after, and every day after, on and on until they had their better world.

Then he lifted up his sword in salute, and the setting sun glittered upon it, and he was drenched in the last golden light.

Polly and Jamie set out with their group before dawn. Polly could not find Calpurnia before she had to leave. No doubt she was with Spartacus, before they parted, but as the day wore on Polly grew sadder that she had not said goodbye.

The land rose steadily. The smaller ones were soon struggling and they had to carry them on their backs. Near the top of yet another hill, one of the older children ran on ahead, and waved to Polly to look back

the way they had come. Four red cloaks stood out starkly against the yellow of the hills. Soldiers had picked up their trail.

Quickly, Polly and Jamie gathered the children together. They told

them to carry on east while they went back to draw the soldiers off in the

opposite direction. The lad who had spotted the soldiers, who was no

more than thirteen, looked at them as if they were mad, but he took the

lead. Polly's heart sank as she watched them go, but she and Jamie still

had work to do. They kicked over their trail and set off westwards.

And the soldiers followed. Throughout the rest of that day Polly and

Jamie led them away. They clambered up and down hills, too tired to

speak, until at last they came over a ridge and gained a view of the

countryside.

A great dark mass was heading north. 'That'll be the army,' Jamie

said. 'God help them.' They slogged on. 'Which way did you send Ben?'

'I didn't send him anywhere. He went to ask Calpurnia where she

wanted him.'

'She said last night she'd send him to you.'

They looked at each other in horror. Polly clutched Jamie's arm. 'Oh

no! He's not...?' She gestured to where the rebel army was now creating

a great storm of dust. Then came a shout behind them, the closest they'd

heard their pursuers yet. Polly despaired. Ben had gone, and Calpurnia,

and she had not said goodbye, would never have the chance. She

glanced at Jamie. He was filthy, exhausted, his face streaked with dirt

and sweat. She imagined she must look as bad.

Polly laughed. 'What a mess!'

'Speak for yourself!'

Another shout, even closer. Polly put her hand on Jamie's arm. 'I'm sorry. I know you wanted to leave much sooner —'

'Now don't say that! I could have gone back to the TARDIS whenever I wanted. So don't say that again!'

Polly squeezed his arm. Then she rubbed her eyes and pointed up the trail. 'Let's go past those rocks at least. That'll hide us for a bit.'

'That's more like it! No need to make it easy for them.'

They went round the corner. And there, leaning towards them as if to ask why it had taken them so long, stood the TARDIS. Polly, scarcely believing it real, pushed at the doors. They swung open, and she ran inside. 'Oh Doctor!' she cried, throwing her arms around him. 'You're here! But we've lost Ben!'

The Doctor patted her on the back. 'There now, my dear, I'm sure we'll find him soon.'

'Doctor,' Jamie said, 'I think he's away with the soldiers. He'll be up on one of those crosses by tonight -'

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'we don't know that for sure, so don't let's panic yet. I told him where I was taking the TARDIS. Perhaps he'll turn

up there... Polly, you might say hello to my young friend Demetrius.'

Sitting on the floor behind the console was a young man with short dark hair and a worn out face. When Polly sat down by him, he reached

out uncertainly. He was blind, she realised, grasping his hand and

holding tight. 'Polly,' he said. 'I'm glad you're safe. But I wish you'd come

back sooner. I wish I'd seen your face.'

The TARDIS landed on an empty shore. Jamie and the Doctor went

to gather driftwood, and Polly wove the vines. Demetrius helped her,

learning rapidly by touch. The sun was low when Ben arrived, bringing

Calpurnia. *Of course,* Polly thought. *I see now. There's a baby.*

'I told him I wanted to fight with him,' Ben said to Polly, as they tied

the wood and vines together. 'I would have, too — right to the end. But

he said he wanted me to do something better than fight. Make sure she'd

live.'

It was night before the raft was ready. Polly held her friend for a long

time. Then Calpurnia kissed her on both cheeks. 'The god of love and life

protect you,' she said. She got onto the raft, and the Doctor helped

Demetrius aboard, placing his hand into Calpurnia's. Soon enough they

had disappeared into the darkness. And when they were gone, Polly

looked up at the sky — and saw Orion, stretched out overhead, like the

gladiator, with his glittering sword.

Polly had a hot bath, washed her hair, and painted her toenails red.

You've come a long way from swinging London, old girl, she thought.

The TARDIS was quiet after the life of the camp.

Can you go back?

Polly went in search of company. In the console room, she found the Doctor. 'I'm glad you saved Demetrius,' she said, to break the silence.

The Doctor played with the controls. 'I owed that poor boy something. I asked him to forge a letter for me, you see — from Crassus to the Senate, asking them to send Pompey to help him end the war.'

Polly stared at him. 'But, Doctor -'

'Spartacus could not win,' the Doctor said firmly. 'The Romans could not allow it. It all depends on slavery, you see... But if Crassus had beaten Spartacus alone, he would have become the most powerful man in the Empire. A man like that?' The Doctor shook his head. 'No, Polly, I couldn't allow it.'

'But all those people... Doctor, what happened to them in the end?'

The Doctor seemed old, and unfamiliar. 'They died, Polly,' he sighed. 'It is, in the end, what people do. The rebels, Crassus, Pompey — those children. All dead, long before you were even born.'

Polly twisted the brittle bracelet around her wrist. Spartacus and Ben and Calpurnia and Polly. Dead? She had never been so alive.

Syracuse, 48 B.C.E.

News reaches us in Sicily that Gnaeus Pompeius has been murdered

in Egypt. 'Pompey the Great,' they called him — the man who lined the road from Capua to Rome with six thousand crosses. With Crassus long

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dead, I would say we have had justice — were it not that all Rome now lies in the hands of the tyrant, Caesar. Rome is his, and with it the world, and all men and women are now slaves. Such is the way of things, I think — some men demand obedience, and the rest submit in fear, believing that they are alone.

Yet my wife speaks still of that other world, a land blessed with sun and peace, without masters or slaves, where men and women act together for the good and the gain of all. And, despite everything, it is not in my heart to deny her.

I, Demetrius of Syracuse, flee man, speak these words; and the child of my wife — the child of my heart — sets them down for me. For my eyes have long been dark, and at times I fear the whole world has darkened with me, beyond all hope or promise. And yet still we put down these words. To let it be known that once good men and women, longing for something better, helped each other cast off their chains. And so that from these pages they can rise again.

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Goths and Robbers

Diane Duane

An adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Tegan and Nyssa

Tegan Jovanka was on her knees in front of the tenth cupboard, or maybe the eleventh. Dust rose as she pushed one more stainless-steel sliding door aside, and sneezed.

‘Aha!' Tegan said, reaching back past packages and bundles to grab a jar at the back. She sat back on her heels, studied the jar, sighed.

'Anything?' said Nyssa from down the hall; she was looking through the next room along in the TARDIS's quaternary storage.

'Well, something.' Tegan stared at the label on the jar, covered with symbols she couldn't understand. She shook the jar. The stuff sloshing in

it was blue, and glowed. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor put his blond head around the edge of the storage room door, peering in. ‘Mmm?'

Tegan held up the jar. 'This is not pasta sauce!'

The Doctor wandered in, peered at the jar. ‘Rassilon's Universal Solvent. So that's where that went. Well done!'

Nyssa put her head around the edge of the storage doorway. 'You said there were at least four bottles of sauce down here.'

'Down here *somewhere*,' the Doctor said.

Tegan stood up, brushing off the dust. 'Time Lords are supposed to be one of the most advanced species, but you can't keep a basic inventory?'

'It's not that simple,' the Doctor said, taking the jar. 'This deep in the TARDIS, the nature of space is more, you know...'

Tegan's stomach growled. 'Confusing?'

'More fluid,' the Doctor said. 'The TARDIS restructures storage as it pleases. It knows where it puts things.' He examined the jar's back label.

‘So regardless of what the TARDIS might know,' Nyssa said, 'you don't have the slightest idea where this "pasta sauce" is.'

'Sandwiches for lunch again!' Tegan said.

'Ridiculous,' the Doctor said, handing Tegan back the jar. 'Pasta we shall have. With sauce.' He headed for the door. 'In the meantime, put that back where you found it. We might need it some day.'

Tegan stood up. 'Universal Solvent. What's it dissolve?'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Universes, of course. Don't spill it.' And he vanished in the direction of the TARDIS's control room.

Tegan glanced at Nyssa to see if she thought the Doctor was joking. Nyssa shrugged. Tegan tucked the jar carefully into one of the open cupboards. 'Where's the sauce going to come from?' she called.

'Italy, of course,' the answer came. 'We'll just nip along to Rome and get some. Won't take long.' Tegan and Nyssa exchanged a look.

'Bets?' Tegan said.

* * *

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By the time they reached the console room, the Doctor was laying in new navigational settings. *For all the world as if he expects to get where he's going on the first try,* Tegan thought. She looked at the time rotor, lazily sliding up and down, and got the sense that something down in the

telepathic circuitry was assessing the Doctor's desires and preparing to give him... *What it bloody well pleases.*

'All right,' the Doctor said. 'First decade of the twenty-first-century should be good enough.' He glanced at an indicator. 'One of the big Italian supermarket chains installed a hyperstore right in the middle of town. You could stand on Trajan's triumphal arch and hit it with a brick.'

'And what will we be using for money?' Nyssa said.

The time rotor slid to its lowest position and stopped. ‘Ah,' the Doctor said. 'Now that you mention it...' He fished in his pocket to make sure he had the TARDIS key, headed for the door, pulled it open, stepped out...

‘Ah,' he said.

'What?' Tegan said. All she could see over the Doctor's shoulder was darkness.

'What's that smell?' Nyssa said. 'Like a swamp.'

'Come on,' the Doctor said. Tegan sighed and went after him.

Tegan's first footstep went squish. 'Mud...' she said to Nyssa.

'The sea's nearby,' the Doctor said. 'Smell the salt?'

The darkness began to pale. Tegan could make out nothing but large lumpy shapes all around. 'Tents,' the Doctor said. 'Watch your step...' He reached back to lock the TARDIS's door, pocketing the key.

Flickering torches appeared from behind the TARDIS, surrounding them. The ten or so people holding the torches were human, every one

holding a sword or spear. All were helmeted, wrapped in tweedy-looking

cloaks, with armour plate or mail glinting under their cloaks.

The Doctor glanced from face to face, finally speaking to one man

wearing a cloak fastened in front with what appeared to be a bear's

paws. He wore a bigger moustache than the others, and a dented helmet

glinting with angular designs inlaid in brass. 'Good evening,' the Doctor

said. 'Would you be so kind as to direct us to the Latian gate? Just south

of the Palatine.'

The bearskin-cloaked man laughed. 'You're out of your way,

northman. Hung a left out of Ostia, did you? Should have gone straight

on.'

Tegan shivered at the cold wind... and at the smell, not just swamp

but something more terrible. 'I take it then,' the Doctor said to the

sergeant — he had that look about him, 'that we are not just outside

Rome?'

The sergeant looked at the Doctor more closely. 'Sorry. Ravenna.'

'Oh dear,' the Doctor said. 'Have we come at a bad time?'

'Oh, no! Now, yesterday, when this place was thick with Vandals and

Franks and rogue Visigoths? *That* would have been a bad time. It's safe

enough now.'

'For us, anyway,' said another man under his breath. 'For you —'

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'Shut up, Ondoher,' the sergeant said. 'Look at him. Isn't he what the commanders told us Himself was looking for?' The sergeant held his torch closer to the Doctor, to Tegan, to Nyssa. 'Outland man, two women, well-spoken but strange. And sorcerous. How else did they get here out of nowhere, sentries never heard them, just fell down like rain

from the sky?'

Uneasy grumbles came from the men. 'And what're we supposed to do with this?' Another big man gestured at the TARDIS. 'Could have landed on somebody.'

'Not without reason,' the Doctor said. He glanced around. 'Well? Who's "Himself"? Shouldn't we go see him?'

Sergeant Bear-Cloak gave the Doctor an amused look. 'Who's "Himself", indeed. You'll soon find out.'

They were hurried along towards a muddy track leading through the swamp. ‘So,' Nyssa said, 'where are we? Besides not where we can buy pasta sauce.'

'Ravenna,' the Doctor said. 'Northern Italy.'

'How many miles from where we should be?' Tegan said, unable to resist the urge to poke him.

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Two hundred or so.'

'And when are we?'

'Judging from the fact that there was a battle here yesterday — '

'This I had noticed,' Nyssa said, in a tone of chilly distaste. Tegan gave Nyssa a look of tight-lipped agreement.

‘— and that these gentlemen escorting us are Goths,' the Doctor said. 'Ostrogoths, actually.' He nodded to Sergeant Bear-Cloak; the sergeant nodded minimally back. 'And this is Ravenna, so that makes this the year... 493. Early February. No, end of January, actually; keep forgetting the calendar reform...'

The track they walked widened out to join a broader, more solid way. But here well away from the tents were other shapes, piled high, and the stink was appalling. Tegan's eyes teared with more than the wind as they passed heap after heap of bodies. 'Who were they all?'

'You heard the sergeant,' the Doctor said. 'Vandals. A lot of Alanni, too, I'd think.'

On the other side of him, Nyssa blinked. 'I thought he was speaking rhetorically.'

'Oh, no,' the Doctor said, 'these were members of the actual Vandal tribes. For a couple of hundred years the Huns kept them from getting down this far. But Attila died at his wedding feast, the Huns went back east, and the Vandals and Alanni started pushing down into the Balkans and across the Alps.' He sighed. 'Rome fell, the Western Empire went

with it, and other forces moved in to fill the vacuum.' He glanced sadly at

the heaps of the slain. 'These people took Ravenna and expected the

remainder of the Empire in the East to realise resistance was useless,

that they should just give up and go away. But Byzantium had one last

piece to push across the board. There was a long siege. Eventually it

broke. Checkmate...'

Ahead in the torchlight loomed a battered brick-and-stone wall some

thirty feet high. More torches were gathered around the gateway there,

the gates now swinging back. In the archway, more guards in high-laced

open boots and scarlet tunics with gold borders bowed and waved them

through into a wide courtyard.

Once the spears were following at a more respectful distance, Tegan

relaxed a little. 'Nice to be treated properly,' she said under her breath.

'That's just what's bothering me,' the Doctor said as quietly. 'The

proper treatment. How did they know we were coming?'

The question made Tegan glance around, wondering what ways

there were out of here besides the gate groaning shut behind them. *Just*

a side effect of travelling with the Doctor; you're always working out

escape routes. But she could see few obvious ones. On three sides they

were surrounded by inner walls ending at ground level in arcades of

stone, the pointed arches held up by pillars. 'Gothic arches?' Tegan said.

'Absolutely right,' the Doctor said. On the fourth side rose a triangular cupola with pillars under it. They were led under this portico to guarded doors set in white stone. The doors opened. They went in.

The draught whistled in from behind, fluttering many torches in a double line of iron stands before them. Tegan concentrated on walking as confidently as she could down that long, empty, dim, mosaic-floored room towards the plain dais at its end as the door thumped shut behind.

Upon the dais was a white wooden chair, simply a broad curve of seat sweeping up into arms. Sitting in it, reading a scroll by a rushlight on a side table, was a tall wiry man. As they approached, he glanced up to see who came. Then, to Tegan's surprise, he stood to greet them.

The man wore a tunic like his guards', with a gilded scale-mail vest and a light cloak of scarlet wool over all. His longish hair was gingery, thinning towards the front. He looked to be in his late thirties; though his eyes seemed tired, his face was otherwise young, high-cheekboned, keen and alert. His gaze rested on Tegan, and then on Nyssa, with nothing like as much surprise as it should have. And when the three of them stopped in front of the dais and looked up, the man took a long breath.

'Doctor,' he said.

Tegan and Nyssa stared.

'We have met,' the man said. 'I am Thiudareiks. Though some hereabouts make it Didrik.'

The Doctor blinked. ‘Theodoric,' he said, and turned to Nyssa and Tegan. 'Flavius Theodoricus, King of the Ostrogoths, regent of the Visigoths, and ruler of Italy.'

' *This* year,' Theodoric said dryly. 'Few can make such a claim for long, these days. It's wise to be cautious.'

‘Theodoric,' the Doctor said, 'is the master of the Western Empire.'

'You mean he's the emperor?' Tegan said.

'Oh, no,' Theodoric said. 'As the local representative of one, I may

have power like an emperor's. But — however tempting it is to assume the title casually — I resist. It tends to be fatal.'

'And others,' the Doctor said, 'can be fatally jealous of it.'

Theodoric nodded, coming down from the dais. ‘So it's all true, Doctor, what you told me then. You said many years might go by, and when you returned, you might not seem touched by age at all... or seem like another man entirely.'

'I did?' the Doctor said. He looked concerned. Theodoric just chuckled. The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Perhaps I might introduce my companions...'

The smile grew broader, to Tegan's surprise, as it was turned towards

her. 'I know these ladies,' he said. 'The excellent Nyssa. And Queen Tegan.'

Tegan's eyebrows went right up.

‘So let us make your name for them true,' Theodoric said. 'We shall break bread together.'

The Doctor looked uncertain. 'I should not say too much about our previous meeting,' Theodoric said. ‘So you warned me, saying free will could become an issue. But we must talk; there are things you must learn without me telling you. And if we talk, we may as well eat.'

'It would be our privilege,' the Doctor said.

Theodoric looked at his guards. 'These folk are old acquaintances of mine... so respect them. Especially the women. They're sibyls, who could fry you to a crisp with a glance.' He smiled an odd smile at Tegan. 'But I'm safe with them. All of you can go.'

The room emptied with some haste. 'Come to my chambers,' Theodoric said. 'There's food there, and wine, and a moment's peace so that you can consider the path ahead. Or back.'

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, and followed the Master of the West towards an archway.

' *Queen* Tegan?' Tegan said to Nyssa.

' *Sibyls?* ' Nyssa said to her.

The two of them hurriedly went after.

'It's palatial,' Tegan said as they walked down a long corridor,

resplendent even in the scanty torchlight. Pillars of marble and wrought

metal glittered with gemmy inlay; ceilings were painted with frescoed

images from this world and the next — lush landscapes stocked with

wide-eyed animals, heavens stuffed with saints. Servitors in silken

poncho-like liveries bowed as they passed.

'Palatial? It ought to be,' Nyssa said. 'It's a palace.'

'Nothing like the great palaces of the south,' Theodoric said.

'Compared to them, this is a cottage. And the place hasn't been well

cared for these last few years.'

Tegan looked around. 'It was under siege, the Doctor said.'

'For thirty-five moons, rain and shine, heat and mud, we sat outside,'

Theodoric said. From one archway ahead of them, moonlight poured;

from another, torchlight, much brighter. 'And they sat inside.' They,

Tegan thought, thinking of the heaps of former human beings lying in the

bleak moonlight. 'Some of them my own people.'

'Your people?' Nyssa said.

'There are Goths and Goths,' Theodoric said. 'My people are divided

— regional, political, religious differences. An older relative took control

of the northern septs of my folk when I was sent south for my education.

When I was of age, he wasn't willing to give up the regency.'

‘Uh-oh,' Tegan said. 'Wicked older brother...'

Theodoric gave her a dry look. ‘Tegan, you were never one to mince your words. Well, wickedness is relative. Though Odoacer did sack Rome.' Tegan opened her mouth, then shut it again.

'When I was old enough, I went into the military with my people's eastern clans,' Theodoric said. 'While Odoacer declared himself King of Italy, and his people overran the peninsula, Emperor Zeno back east viewed with distress the prospective dismemberment of western civilization. So he sent someone to —'

'Dislodge Odoacer,' the Doctor said. 'Someone dispossessed of his birthright, who would be pleased to save the west while taking back what was his own.'

'As well as relocating the eastern Goths then sitting on the emperor's own doorstep to a comfortable distance, under a trusted officer.'

Theodoric smiled. 'And here we are, the possessors of the west— barbarians in togas, deluded enforcers of a spent force. So everyone thinks.'

The man and the Time Lord approached that stripe of moonlight lying across the mosaic floor. 'Doctor, have you ever, in your long life, felt you were a pawn? Moved about by greater forces, pushed into actions you would not yourself have chosen?'

'It's rarely so straightforward a realisation,' the Doctor said. 'Understanding the subtleties can take a long time...'

'Sometimes not so long,' Theodoric said.

Moonlight glittered silver on the embroidery at the edge of the

draperies in the archway to their left. 'It's going to get all philosophical

now,' Nyssa said to Tegan, wandering towards the archway. 'And he

won't even see how gorgeous the surroundings are.' She pushed aside

the figured velvet of the draperies. 'Just look at this —'

And Nyssa's breath caught. 'Doctor?'

The fear in the word went through Tegan like a knife. 'Excuse me,' the

Doctor said, and went to where Nyssa stood rigid, looking past the half-

open curtain.

The Doctor slipped past the drapery, Tegan behind him. The room

beyond was beautiful. It reminded Tegan of a church, with gothic-style

arches up and down the sides of the room, grey and white marble pillars

and intricate mosaic floor. But most churches did not have a long table

running down the length of them, all covered with scattered plates and

cups, the remnant of a feast and no churches Tegan knew had such a

table with a dead person sitting at the far end.

The Doctor walked down to him. The dead man lay sprawled on the

table, a cup near his hand glinting in the broad daggers of silvery

moonlight falling through the pointed window-arches. There were

bloodstains on the table's inlaid marble, more blood on the white

marble

floor. The man wore a Goth tunic trimmed a handspan deep in silver, gemmed rings and bracelets of raw gold on the outflung arms. But the long, fair, formally braided hair was dark with clotted blood.

'The former King of Italy, I presume,' the Doctor said.

'I'm sorry about this,' said Theodoric. 'It's been very disorganised today, and we haven't had a chance to clean up yet.'

The Doctor's expression was terribly neutral. 'The siege wasn't broken by battle, at the end, was it?'

Theodoric stood by the Doctor, gazing at the man slumped there. 'We came to an agreement I would have preferred not to make.' Theodoric looked regretful. 'There was a banquet to celebrate. Some came armed to that banquet, betraying the hospitality of the hosts — ' He let out a long breath, turned away. 'It's cold here. Let's get down to my chambers.'

The Doctor stood looking at Odoacer. Beside him, Nyssa glanced at Theodoric. 'Do you trust him?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor said. 'But he trusts me. I must find out why.'

He headed after the Master of the West, and Tegan and Nyssa followed

him closely.

Theodoric's chambers were furnished in a campaigner's easily transported style — rugs and hangings, low tables, wooden folding chairs. Everything was draped in warm-coloured silks, and cushions were scattered round. On the centremost table were round flatbreads

and cheeses and flagons of wine, and dishes being kept warm over small charcoal pots — chicken in a red sauce, spiced beans. It all looked homey and comfortable to Tegan, except when she thought of the moonlight in the empty banqueting hall, and the feaster left behind.

They sat on the floor around the low table, and Theodoric tore the bread with his own hands and gave them each a piece. When Tegan's stomach growled, she glanced apologetically at their host, but the Master of the West just dunked his bread into the bean dish and said, 'Watch out for the pomegranate seeds in the chicken.'

For a while there was only the sound of people who hadn't had any lunch doing something about it. After the edge was off their hunger, the Doctor sat back among the cushions and said, 'Now, forgive me if I'm curious to hear about how we met.'

Theodoric took a swig of wine from a chased brass beaker. 'You really do not know,' he said. ‘But you did say before that when you passed this way again, you might not know me. The river...' He glanced out the window, where past the city walls the nearby river ran slow and brackish into the marshes. 'It wanders, even bends back on itself, before it finds the sea. Who would have thought that time itself might do so.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said. 'But when was "before"?'

'Many years ago, at the heart of the Eastern Empire, in

Constantinople. But you told me that when we met again, I was not to tell

you exactly when or where. Your craft would know the way.'

The Doctor nodded. 'It sounds like something I would have said.'

‘It wasn't the first time you'd been there. You knew your way around.

But when you arrived, something had just gone missing,' Theodoric said.

'You turned up just as the loss was noticed.'

Nyssa rolled her eyes at Tegan. This was another situation in which

one kept winding up with the Doctor. Tegan grinned, went back to

finishing the chicken.

'Did anything untoward happen before we left?' the Doctor said.

Theodoric laughed out loud. ‘Doctor, you were in Constantinople, city

of intrigue and murder! But you three were all right when you left. You

solved the problem posed to you, and someone there was most

impressed.'

Tegan caught the glitter of interest in the Doctor's eyes. 'You sound

like you think it's important I should be there,' he said.

'At the time, so did you. I didn't understand it then. Now I think that if

you hadn't been there, things here, now, might not have gone the way

they did. For an explanation, I will have to turn to you, as your title

indicates.'

'Title?' Nyssa said.

'Doctor means teacher. Or one who leads...' Theodoric rose. 'It's been a long day, so I'll say good evening to you now. But not farewell.' And one of the ubiquitous servitors was standing in the curtained doorway. Theodoric bowed to them and vanished behind another curtain.

The servitor led them to a suite of rooms furnished like Theodoric's: rugs and tapestries and cushions, and in the main room, several long wide couches. Tegan sat down on one, kicking off her shoes with a long sigh of relief. The Doctor stood looking out the window that gave onto the moonlit courtyard behind.

Nyssa tucked herself up cross-legged on the couch opposite Tegan's, gazing at the moonlight. 'Such a cold colour. It drains the life from everything...'

Life being drained from things was too much on Tegan's mind as it was. 'Are we really safe here?'

The Doctor turned away from the window. 'I believe so. We're caught in a causal loop, and if anything was going to happen to us tonight, Theodoric would never have met me, or you two. To conserve this timeline, he has to.'

‘Have you run into many of these loops?' Nyssa said, as the Doctor sat down on the couch nearest the window.

The Doctor shook his head, slipping out of his jacket and boosting himself up to sit crosslegged on his couch like Nyssa. 'A careful traveller avoids them. They're inelegant.' Tegan smiled at the concept of the

Doctor as a 'careful' time traveller. 'But we can trust the TARDIS to get

us where and when we need to be.'

'Oh really?' Tegan said. 'We're supposed to be in Rome, in two thousand and something! Instead we're fifteen hundred years back in time and — what, two hundred miles north? And still no sauce.'

The Doctor's smile was only slightly pained. 'Casual travel is one thing. Temporal imperatives are quite another. The TARDIS's telepathic circuitry will detect that we're in the same spacetime with a being who knows me due to an unclosed temporal loop. In the morning we'll be fifteen hundred miles east and a few decades ago.'

A bowl of fruit sat on a nearby table. The Doctor picked up an apple, turning it over in his hands. ‘But the iffy part of this is working out what we do there.'

'You should have asked Theodoric for more details,' Tegan said.

'It's not that simple,' the Doctor said. 'Eliminate free will from the equation, and the universe casts itself in concrete all around you. Add too much, and the solid ground turns to quicksand.' He shook his head.

'It's interesting that this should come up in conjunction with Theodoric. His people, the eastern Goths, belong to a sect of Christianity that almost got killed off because their fundamentalist attitude towards

predestination

and free will conflicted with that of their neighbours. Theodoric, though,'

and the Doctor bit into the apple, 'is quite a moderate.' He munched

thoughtfully. 'Almost alone among his people, he seems to take the long

view.'

'You'd almost think he'd been talking to a Time Lord,' Nyssa said.

The Doctor nodded. 'Thousands of loot-happy warriors all around

him, hot to tear down the old structure... and one intent on saving it.' He

took another few bites, finishing the apple. ‘Theodoric became intent on

preserving what remains of the empire in Italy. He'll have saved a bigger

west than he knew.' The Doctor eyed the apple's core. 'After the east

falls, the last few sparks of the culture here will last just long enough to

restart the fire north of the mountains. Paris and London and Munich will

rise because Ravenna took such a long time falling — time Theodoric

bought for the rest of the west, and history...'

The Doctor picked a seed out of the apple core. 'But the river of time

has eddies. Sometimes some small detail perturbs the current more than

even Time Lords might predict.' He looked into the shadows. ‘Who

knows whether that man in the banqueting hall was meant to die?

Whether Earth's west might rise even higher if he could be spared?'

The

Doctor looked at the little dark seed in his palm. 'Who knows what later

wars might be avoided, what slaughters averted...'

He sighed and dropped the seed onto the mosaic floor, to be instantly

lost in a sea of fine detail. 'I have to meet Theodoric when he was

younger... and do the thing that will make him the man he is today. Or

more than the man he is...' The Doctor let out a long breath. 'You two

should get some sleep.'

Nyssa looked closely at the Doctor. 'What about you?'

No answer. Tegan stretched out, closed her eyes, and fell asleep

hoping the local mosquitoes didn't like foreign food... while knowing that

across the room, a Time Lord was sitting up late and thinking hard.

In the morning they made their way back to the TARDIS, now

surrounded by a guard of sleepy, hostile Goths. They were all watching

the police box, and Tegan couldn't get rid of the idea that it was watching

them.

'Your box is haunted,' said one of the Goths.

'Weird noises all night,' said another. 'Wouldn't let people sleep.' The

Doctor smiled. 'We'll be out of your hair in a moment.'

Tegan and Nyssa smiled at the man on horseback who watched

them, and stepped into the TARDIS as the Doctor paused, looked over his shoulder at Theodoric. He shut the door and turned to the main console.

'Now then...' The Doctor examined some read-outs, then pulled up a cover to reveal a set of switches Tegan didn't remember having seen before. He flipped several, then hit a button.

The rotor began to move; the normal echoing, grinding, wheezing noise began. What surprised and concerned Tegan, though, was how long it persisted. Almost exactly when she was opening her mouth to say

something, the time rotor slid to its lowest and stopped.

The Doctor headed for the doors. 'Here we are.'

'How are we supposed to find Theodoric, exactly?' Nyssa said.

'It may take some doing,' the Doctor said. 'He'll be between five and ten years old... and children in the royal Byzantine court, being prime candidates for kidnapping, are pretty closely protected. However — '

He threw the door open, stepped out into blazing sunshine.

Nyssa and Tegan followed. Under a hot, blue, cloudless sky, the TARDIS had placed itself in the heart of a white-walled expanse of manicured palms and citron trees all in white flower — sweet-smelling

herbs and flowering plants arranged in concentric circles around a huge

brass basin.

The Doctor strolled over to it, hands in pockets, leaning back to gaze at the towering brass obelisk rearing out of the fountain's basin. 'I saw

them inaugurate this,' the Doctor said. 'Couple of centuries back. At parties they'd fill it with fruit — peaches, nectarines, apricots. Heaps of pistachios and almonds. Then — ' He pointed at the brass pineapple on the top. 'Pineapple juice would squirt out of there and run down.'

'Sounds sticky,' Nyssa said.

'Oh yes. But there was a big pool inside the main building on the other side.' The Doctor gestured at a semicircular goldstone building down at the end of the garden. Past it, glittering, the Bosphorus burned blue. 'Everyone would wind up in there eventually, either because they wanted to, or because other people would throw them in.'

'Doesn't sound like people have changed much,' Tegan said.

'Human nature,' the Doctor said. 'Only thing on this planet you can always depend on.'

Nyssa fanned herself decorously. 'It's hot.'

The Doctor cocked an eye at the sun. 'Mad dogs and Time Lords,' he said, ambling down through the garden, around the brass basin and in the general direction of the building. 'The Triconchos, they used to call that,' the Doctor said, 'the triple shell'.

'Why?' Nyssa said.

‘No idea. Everything here's a symbol for something else. These

people were famous for loving everything obscure — subtlety for its own

sake.'

And then he stopped. Tegan, seeing his expression, thought, *Oh no,*

the guards already? Her time with the Doctor had taught her that the

most halcyon surroundings could suddenly suffer an attack of big

muscular people with instructions to seize them. But Tegan saw nothing

but a rustling among the bushes on the left side of the garden, against

the wall. 'What is it?'

'Someone small,' the Doctor said, heading in that direction.

As they got closer, Tegan heard something moving between them

and the wall. The Doctor got down on his hands and knees, peering into

the shrubbery. 'Well,' he said. 'Hello there.'

A small voice said, 'Can you see Baba?'

'Who's Baba?'

'My bunny,' said the voice. It sounded not at all concerned by the

appearance of a full-grown human being in utterly un-Byzantine clothes.

'Can you see him? I had to put him down to shut the door, and I can't see

where he went.'

'What colour is he?' said the Doctor, entirely into the shrubbery now.

Tegan and Nyssa got down on their knees too, peering into the greenery.

'Brown mostly,' said the small voice.

'All right. What door were you shutting?'

'You can't see it now,' the voice said. 'It's an out-only door. There's an in-only door further around.' Something else rustled. 'There he is! Can you get him?'

'I think... Wait,' the Doctor said, and now the rustling came from two directions. 'Towards me — lift that branch so he can see what I've got —

Yes, smells nice, doesn't it? Come on... There we are, then.'

The Doctor inched backwards, then straightened, holding a handsome biscuit-brown rabbit that munched away on a leaf of something green.

Tegan realised that the celery stalk stuck in the Doctor's lapel looked shorter than usual.

She grinned. Though she knew the celery was supposed to change colour in the presence of some gases the Doctor was allergic to, this was the first time she could remember seeing him actually use it for anything.

‘So,' the Doctor said. 'I've got him. Come on out.'

The boy who crawled out of the shrubbery was perhaps eight years old: brown, wiry, barefoot, and red-headed. His stained white tunic made him look, if possible, more tanned than he really was. He sat back on his

heels, looking them all over. 'Hello,' he said.

'This is Tegan,' the Doctor said, 'and Nyssa. I'm the Doctor. Do you want Baba back?'

The little boy stretched out his arms; the Doctor deposited the rabbit in them. 'You caught him really quickly,' the boy said.

'Well, half the work of getting them to come to you is knowing how to think like a bunny.'

'Do bunnies think?'

'Oh yes,' the Doctor said. 'About bunny things. Your job, if you want to run the bunny's life rather than have it run yours, is to think like the bunny. Then you can get it to do what you want by giving it what it wants.

Or thinks it wants.' He pulled the remainder of the celery off his lapel and handed it to the boy. 'I think they call this *selinon* here,' he said, 'or *kereviz*. Ask the gardener. Bunnies will do anything for it.'

The little boy sat down cross-legged with the bunny in his lap, and got busy feeding it the rest of the celery. 'He really likes that a lot!' he said.

The Doctor nodded. 'Tell me, what's your name?'

‘Rithros.'

'And what do you do here?'

‘I'm a hostage.'

Tegan looked at the Doctor for elucidation, but got none. 'Difficult work,' the Doctor said, 'though not disagreeable if your harbourer treats you well.'

'Oh, the emperor's all right,' Rithros said. 'I never see him, though, just the household eunuchs, and they don't care what I do as long as I don't get in trouble with the royal kids. Not that it's easy, some of them are mean.'

The rabbit finished the celery; Rithros sat back, hugging it, and looked down towards the big semicircular building. The bronze doors in the face of it swung open. A double column of tunicked, armour-wearing men came out, glinting in the hot sun. Tegan sighed. *Another day, another batch of guards,* she thought, as the men made their way towards them up the garden paths. *And the eternal question: will this be a 'Come with us' batch or a 'Seize them' batch?*

The guards surrounded them, looking curiously at the travellers and the TARDIS. The Doctor bowed to the one with the most ornate armour.

'Gentlemen. Nice weather we're having.'

'And who would you be,' said the man in the ornate armour, 'and what is that?'

'My conveyance,' the Doctor said. 'I'm called the Doctor, and I'm doubtless expected.'

'By whom?'

'By the one who will be least pleased to find that I've been kept waiting out here. And a... certain young man... is involved. So if I were you, I'd do what I could to make sure the wait is short.'

The guard-leader's brows knitted together. 'It's not about the corona, is it?'

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The Doctor looked thoughtful. ‘I'd say that the probabilities are high that it will be.'

The guards' leader looked at the boy and the rabbit. ‘Rithros, you know anything about this?'

'He just came out of nowhere,' Rithros said, 'him and the box. And he helped me catch Baba.'

'All right,' the leader said, turning to one of his men. ‘Xantho, go back and tell the master of the household what we've found and what the man said.' He bowed to the Doctor. 'My men will remain, sir. As escort of honour, of course.'

'Of course,' the Doctor said. He nodded courteously to the guard-leader and turned to admire the garden.

Tegan and Nyssa followed his lead; before long the doors in the main building opened again. A boy whose tunic glittered with gold came up towards them, surrounded by more guards and practically strutting with self-importance. As he got closer, Tegan could see that the new boy was dark-haired, grey-eyed, short, well-knit, but the eyes were insolent and cold. *Looks like a nasty piece of work,* she thought.

The guards all bowed. 'Prince Leo,' the leader of the guards muttered

to Tegan as the boy marched up to them. ‘I'd bow if I were you, lady.'

Tegan had her own thoughts about that, and stood straight, as did the Doctor and Nyssa. Between the prince's brows, a pronounced scowl line appeared as he dismissed her and Nyssa with a glance. But then Prince Leo gave the Doctor a dismissive look as well — which annoyed Tegan profoundly.

Even more annoying was the look Prince Leo trained on Rithros. It was the look you gave your favourite toy truck when preparing to take it away from another kid. 'What are you people doing with my slave?'

The Doctor looked down at the prince, a cool regard. ‘If he's a hostage, he's hardly your slave.'

Prince Leo laughed. 'He might as well be. Who are you?'

'I'm the Doctor.'

The prince turned away. 'I have enough teachers.'

'Wiser men than either of us,' the Doctor said, 'have said one can never have enough teachers.'

Prince Leo laughed. 'You sound like my mother.'

'We're doomed,' Tegan said under her breath.

'Bring them in,' said the boy to the guards. 'She wants to see them.'

He grinned an unpleasant grin at Rithros. 'And *you*. This should be fun.'

He turned back towards the doors.

'I must say,' Nyssa said to the Doctor as they were led in his wake, 'I don't much like his attitude.'

'Wouldn't disagree. But let's see where this leads us.'

They walked down into the forecourt of the building — a huge space

with three large angular alcoves. 'The Sigma,' the Doctor said, glancing

at the fifteen pillars supporting an upper mezzanine. In the middle stood

a wide pillar with a stone chair on top, and — leading down from either

side of the pillar — steps to the main floor. Above the stone chair was an

arbour of interwoven greenery; above the arbour, a skylight. On either

side of that atrium space, Tegan saw brightly dressed courtiers staring

down, lips moving in whispers.

From behind the stone chair on its pillar came a sudden sharp voice.

'Those people! *Seize them!* '

Tegan swallowed, looking to see if the Doctor was going to shout,

'Run!' But he stood noncommittally as more people with bright cloaks and

shining weapons closed in.

Down those stairs, with a second group of guards, came a figure in

billowing silks of brilliant gold-bordered crimson: a tall, thin, angry-

looking woman, dark hair bound up tightly under a tiara. Once at ground-

floor level she hastened towards them, her angry gaze fastened on the

Doctor. As she approached, Prince Leo stepped up.

'They were in the garden,' he said, 'with him.' Prince Leo pointed at

Rithros, who stood off to one side holding his bunny.

'Good afternoon,' the Doctor said, bowing to the woman.

'That depends on whether we find what's lost,' she said. 'Who are you, and what have you done with the corona?'

'I am the Doctor. And I'm sorry I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about.'

'Or who you're talking to,' the woman said, 'that's plain. I am the Princess Ariadne.'

‘Ah. Daughter of .. the elder Leo, wasn't it?'

'Isn't it,' Ariadne said, confused and cross. 'Where do you come from that you aren't sure who the present emperor is?'

'A long way off,' the Doctor said.

'Yes,' Princess Ariadne said, scornful, 'I can tell by the trousers. Well, the guilty parties are easy to identify.'

'Are they?' Nyssa said, sounding tart. 'It must be nice to be so certain.'

The princess gave Nyssa a venomous look — and Tegan too, for no good reason. ‘So that you may stop feigning ignorance, it's the Corona Byzantia that's missing.'

The Doctor blinked. 'The great lost Crown of the Byzantines? This is when it vanished?'

Tegan sighed. *When else? We were going to be here.*

Ariadne turned on Rithros. 'Where has this man made you hide it?' 'I didn't hide it anywhere,' Rithros said.

'Don't lie,' said the princess. 'The prince said he saw you creeping out of the casket room this morning! Why would you be in there except to steal? Like all your kind, you're a thief at heart, you —'

'Madam,' the Doctor said, 'what do you think has happened?'

'I am sure you know quite well,' said Princess Ariadne, 'since you and this ill-born scapegrace appear together. Doubtless you put him up to it,

thinking a child affiliated with the imperial household would not be suspected. We are not the fools you barbarians think us. Search them!'

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Once the Doctor's coat was off, it was plain that none of them had any large object about them. The leader of the first group of guards said,

'Lady, the man was watched from the time his box appeared until now.

He's given the boy nothing, and taken nothing from him.'

'But you said they were out of sight for a time,' the princess said to one of her guards. 'In the bushes. Search there.'

'Oh, come on, you daft woman,' Tegan said, ‘if he did steal your silly crown, which he didn't, you think he'd leave it in the shrubbery?'

The princess favoured her with a look of exquisite scorn. 'And who would you be?'

'My companion,' the Doctor said. 'Tegan Jovanka.'

Nyssa's glance flicked towards Rithros. 'High Queen of Brisbane,' she said.

Tegan opened her mouth, shut it again.

The Doctor bowed in Nyssa's direction. 'And this is Nyssa, daughter of the Consul of the Traken Union.'

'That's an empire of a hundred whole planets,' Tegan said sweetly.

'Doubtless you're all petty royalty of some kind, but not any kind that matters here,' Princess Ariadne said, 'since I am the only one with an armed force to back me up.'

Tegan flushed hotly. 'Well, that's such a pedestrian rationale, isn't it? Suits you.'

Rithros giggled. Several guards wore the expressions of men desperately trying to keep their faces from showing what was going on in their heads. Ariadne's eyes went wide; her mouth worked, trying to find a word to push out. 'And as for the rest of you,' Tegan said, glaring around and remembering Theodoric's words, 'we're sibyls, we are! You so much as muss our hair and we'll fry you to a crisp with a glance, just see if we don't.'

The guards stared from Princess Ariadne to Tegan as if expecting one or the other to burst into flame. Catching a sideways glimpse of Rithros smothering his giggles and slipping away with his bunny, Tegan folded her arms and concentrated on giving the princess the scathing look she reserved for economy class passengers who asked her to

sneak them champagne from first class.

Ariadne finally gasped in enough breath to cry, 'Why are you all

standing here? Some of you get into that blue box and find whether the

corona's there.'

The Doctor drew himself up. 'I regret that you will find that impossible.'

'We shall see,' the princess said. 'Meanwhile, put them away.'

Here comes the seizing part, Tegan thought, too annoyed with the

princess to bother being scared. She held her head high, as would befit

the High Queen of Brisbane, and gave the guards who came up on

either side of her a withering look. 'Remember, now! And which way are

we going?'

'Straight ahead, great lady,' said the guard on her left, sounding

terrified.

Good, Tegan thought. *That makes two of us.* 'Lead on,' she said.

'I thought you said these people were all about subtlety,' Nyssa said.

She sounded cross, peering out through the delicately designed but very

solid iron latticework in their cell door.

'And cruelty,' the Doctor said. 'Did I mention cruelty?'

'If you had,' Tegan said, 'we might not be here!'

She flopped down on the nearest bench. *At least as dungeons go it's*

not bad. In her travels with the Doctor, Tegan had acquired a connoisseur's knowledge of confinement facilities. This one had a certain refined character, being dry, warm, and providing somewhere to sit — a distinct advantage. Tegan had lost track of how many pairs of tights she'd ruined while sitting on some alien cell's floor. The marble benches were smooth, if cold, and left her free to consider larger issues, like whether these people were big on torture.

'What on Earth possessed you?' Tegan said to Nyssa after a moment.

'Queen of Brisbane?'

'High Queen,' Nyssa said, smiling mischievously. 'It just came into my mind after what Theodoric said. And I just couldn't help it. The princess, she was just so — '

'Insufferable,' Tegan said. 'Yeah. Thanks so much for encouraging me to say what I was thinking.' She leaned back, glanced at the Doctor.

'And how does Mrs High and Mighty make you out to be a barbarian just because of your trousers?'

'A lot of northern tribes wore them.' The Doctor turned from gazing up at their only window — only a foot wide, and thirty feet up in its wall. 'All that cold weather...'

'So this great lost crown,' Tegan said, 'what's so great about it?'

'Mostly that it was lost.'

Nyssa gave the Doctor a look.

'No, really! You never saw such a piece of regalia for getting mislaid.

Had a mind of its own, that crown. Wherever it *did* turn up, something

about it impressed people so much that they tended to think it was alive.

When the Hungarians come by it eventually, they'll actually give it legal

standing as a person, the true ruler of the realm. The King of Hungary

will only be king because the crown allows him to wear it.'

'Weird,' Tegan said.

'But there's a problem,' the Doctor said. 'It didn't actually get lost now.'

From the door came a tiny tapping sound.

Nyssa, nearest the door, looked out through the iron grille, and

whispered, ‘Rithros?'

'I can't stay long,' the whisper came back. 'Here, this fell out of your

pocket in the bushes when you were catching Baba.'

And in through the grille came the key to the TARDIS.

The Doctor stepped to the door, took the chain. 'Thank you. Where's

the TARDIS now?'

'They brought it inside,' Rithros said. 'It's in the Sigma.'

'Excellent!'

'The princess can't get in,' Rithros said. 'She's sending guards down

to bring you upstairs.'

'What about the corona?' the Doctor said.

'Prince Leo has it,' Rithros said.

'Indeed. Rithros, go back to your room, we'll meet there.'

'All right.' A pause. ‘Uh oh, they're coming — '

Rithros vanished down the hall, was gone. The Doctor smiled, tucking the TARDIS key away and beckoning them away from the door. 'Let's all look natural,' he said, and sat down on one of the benches.

'You dropped the TARDIS key?' Nyssa whispered.

'It's rarely an accident,' the Doctor whispered back. 'You can consider the key a part of the TARDIS, you know, it's all idiophasic technology at heart, and sometimes the system moves to protect itself by — '

'Can I say right now that this is making my head hurt?' Tegan said.

'You can have an aspirin after lunch,' the Doctor said as footsteps approached. 'Meanwhile, when I open the TARDIS, get straight in there.'

The bolt outside the door was thrown, and guards came in. They regarded the Doctor with concern, but more of their nervous attention was bent on Tegan and Nyssa. Tegan got back into character as High Queen of Brisbane, standing up in affronted dignity. 'It's about time! Lead the way.'

In the Sigma, the TARDIS sat in the middle of the shining floor, surrounded by guards who looked nervous to be near it. There too was the furious Princess Ariadne. When she laid eyes on Tegan, she pointed at her and said, 'Put that back in the cell.'

'You poisonous little cow,' Tegan muttered. She drew herself up tall and pointed right back at Princess Ariadne. 'So much as touch me,' she announced, 'and my fellow sibyl and I will turn that woman into a potted palm. Which, if you ask me, would be an improvement. And I'll do the same for the rest of you. So don't try my patience!'

Not a guard moved an inch. Ariadne went white and shut her mouth.

Tegan cocked an eyebrow at Nyssa. 'Our wisdom tells us that you desire the Doctor to open the blue box,' Nyssa said in an ominous voice.

'It is well you sent for us, for if anyone but he opened it, the demons inside would kill you all. Once the Doctor opens the door, we will go in and quiet them. Then you may enter.'

'May!' Tegan said under her breath. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor brushed past them to the TARDIS's door, bringing up what seemed an empty hand and placing it over the lock. Tegan knew he had palmed the key. The door swung inward.

Tegan and Nyssa swept regally past the Doctor and into the TARDIS.

He was right behind, and Tegan just had time to see the Doctor slam the TARDIS's door in the nearest guard's face.

'Well played,' the Doctor said, heading for the console. He hit a control; the time rotor started to move.

‘So,' Tegan said, 'now what?'

'Now we have to touch base with Rithros.'

The time rotor stopped; the Doctor headed for the door. He opened it

a crack, peered out. 'My word, it's good this space wasn't any smaller...'

He squeezed outside. Tegan and Nyssa peered out. The room in

which the TARDIS had materialised was not much more than three times

its size. Across from the open door was a plain stone wall with a soft

mattress spread at its foot. To one side, near a closed wooden door, two

of the wall's close-set blocks of stone had swung inward on some hidden

hinge. Crouched half in, half out of that opening's darkness was Rithros,

who was gazing up at the TARDIS.

'Wow,' he said.

The Doctor smiled. 'Come on!'

Rithros scrambled to his feet, darted in the TARDIS's door. The

Doctor closed it, heading to the console. 'How is it so big inside?' he

asked.

'Magic,' the Doctor said. Mercifully — for Tegan didn't fancy sitting

through a lecture on dimensional transcendence — the boy seemed to

accept that. 'You said Prince Leo has the corona?'

'He had it, but he's hidden it. See, Prince Leo stole Baba out of my

room this morning and locked him up in the emperor's precious storage,

which is right next to the casket room where they keep the corona and the really important stuff. When I went in to get Baba out, Leo locked me in, and the only way I could get out was to use the secret door out of the precious storage into the casket room.'

'There seem to be a lot of secret doors around here,' Nyssa said.

'All over. Emperors are always getting assassinated by their staff, so almost every room has a secret way in or out, if you can find it.'

'That's how you popped up in the garden,' Tegan said.

Rithros nodded. 'I came out of the casket room with Baba. But the guards saw me go to my room with him. They searched the casket room and found the corona was gone, and Prince Leo told his mother I took it.'

Tegan frowned. 'Knew I didn't like his attitude.'

'He does stuff like this all the time,' Rithros said. 'But he never did it with anything big before. He wants to get me sent home because the emperor said I'm to take lessons with the prince's tutor. The prince thinks it'll make him look low class to have the same tutor as one of the court hostages.'

'I bet I know where he gets that,' Tegan said.

'All right,' the Doctor said. 'Where's the corona?'

'Leo hid the corona in his mother's chambers,' Rithros said. 'In a chest by her plunge bath. She doesn't know, though. Her slaves are really scared because Leo told them he'd have them whipped to death if they

told anybody. They're more scared of him than they are of his mother, because he'll be emperor some day.'

The Doctor stood thinking. 'All right. We'll see to it that the corona's found somewhere else entirely. And after this, you want to take better care of Baba. You've seen you're not the only one who can be a

hostage. You can't let other people hold the things you care about for ransom.'

Rithros nodded.

'Good,' the Doctor said. 'Come here, put your hands on this.' He pointed at a spot on the TARDIS's console that looked like bare metal. As Rithros placed his hands on it, the metal glowed softly under his touch. 'Make a picture in your head of where the corona's hidden. Close your eyes if that helps you see.'

Rithros closed his eyes. The Doctor touched controls. The time rotor rose and fell just twice, then stopped.

'Did it work?' Tegan said, never having seen the Doctor use this targeting mechanism before.

'Oh, I think so,' he said. 'For very short transits, in special circumstances.' He went to the door, opened it a crack, looked around. 'Well done, Rithros!'

The boy slipped out the door, heading across a creamy-golden marble floor that stretched away to windows looking down on the

Bosphorus. Moments later he was back with something golden in his hands.

'Quick,' the Doctor said, shutting the door. 'Give me that. Hands on the panel again. Are Leo's rooms guarded on the outside during the day?'

'Yes,' Rithros said. His eyes glinted as the Doctor came up beside him to touch controls.

The time rotor moved. Tegan came over to examine the item the Doctor had set down on the console. It was relatively plain, a heavy, thick, head- sized band of hammered gold about three inches wide, set with oval enamelled miniatures the size of a hen's egg.

The time rotor stopped. The Doctor moved to the door, peered out. 'All right, all's clear. Take the corona and leave it on a table or some such.' The boy hurried out.

'A pity you can't use that kind of targeting aid,' Nyssa said.

The Doctor shook his head. 'We rarely do jumps so short. But that he's able to use it so well suggests a disciplined mind. Lessons with a tutor are going to do the future Master of the West a great deal of good.'

Tegan blinked. 'How do you get "Theodoric" out of "Rithros"?'

'It'd have been Erithros originally,' the Doctor said. 'Greek for red. Remember the names I mentioned in Ravenna? *Flavius* means red too.'

Rithros ran back in. 'There was a table inside the door. I left it there.'

'Very good,' the Doctor said, hitting a control; the time rotor moved again. 'I assume the servants know about the bad blood between you

and Prince Leo. Everyone will work out what seems to have happened. If

Leo's smart, he'll never try that kind of game again.'

'I don't know if this'll be enough,' Rithros said. His eyes were scared

and sad. 'I could be here for years. And today, your magic box kept you

from getting killed. But people here get killed for much less than what

they said we did.'

'I know,' the Doctor said. 'But you're going to make it.' He glanced at

the controls. 'We'll be back in your room soon, but now come over here. I

have important things to tell you.'

The boy and the Time Lord moved off to one side, and the Doctor got

down on one knee, looked earnestly in the boy's eyes and began

speaking softly to him. Tegan glanced over at Nyssa, whose eyes were

suddenly shadowed. 'What?' Tegan said.

Nyssa shook her head. 'Later.'

The time rotor stopped. Across the console room, the Doctor held out

a hand. Rithros grasped his forearm, a warrior's gesture to another

warrior. Then Rithros went to Nyssa and hugged her, and next went to

Tegan. As she put her arms around him, in her ear Rithros said, 'Queen

Tegan, you get angry even better than the Princess Ariadne. I'm going to

practice getting angry just like you!'

Tegan smiled and held the little boy away from her, working to keep out of her face the sudden thought of a cold empty banqueting hall and a man sprawled dead on a table. *Did I make him do that? Will what I say or how I act in the next second undo that act... or make him do it?* The hair rose on the back of her neck. ‘Not just like me,' Tegan said. 'Be careful how you get angry at people who're trying to hurt you. It's hard to take it back, sometimes.'

Rithros nodded, wearing the expression of a little boy trying hard to be serious when he was actually wildly excited by the most interesting things that had ever happened to him.

'Go on,' Tegan said. 'Good luck.'

He headed out the TARDIS's door. It closed behind him. Nyssa looked at Tegan. The Doctor let out a breath. 'All right, that loop's handled.'

'But what about the crown?' Tegan said. 'Is it still going to be the lost crown of the Byzantines if it's found before the day's out?'

'It has plenty more time to get lost in,' the Doctor said, 'as originally scheduled. But now something important has happened to it, something that had to happen first. It's been inside a TARDIS.'

'And hence,' Nyssa said, 'exposed to the influence of the Eye of Harmony...'

'With which all TARDISes are in sync,' the Doctor said. 'Physical

objects that come in here are normally "proofed" by the TARDIS's own failsafes against the side-effects of exposure to such an unusual energy source. But if you specifically exempt an item from those failsafes — and the TARDIS's telepathic circuitry — an object may behave very strangely in later years.' He smiled. 'Even give people the idea that it's alive...'

'So all this,' Nyssa said, 'has been about fulfilling a destiny. Something's? Or someone's?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'They're linked... sometimes too tightly to tease apart. Meanwhile — ' He turned back to the console. 'Back to Ravenna, to finish closing the loop. And then...'

'Lunch?' Tegan said.

The Doctor smiled, saying nothing. But the look in his eyes was haunted. And, Tegan thought, he's not alone...

It was night when they arrived in Ravenna. The Doctor looked over the TARDIS's controls when the time rotor slid to a stop. He was reading something there, but wouldn't say what: just straightened up, heading for the door. 'Won't be long.'

The door shut. For several breaths Tegan and Nyssa looked at each other. Then, 'There's just one thing I have to see,' Tegan said.

Nyssa stood irresolute — then sighed. 'I'm coming with you.'

They headed down that long, cold hallway. It was empty, once again striped with moonlight. Tegan saw the curtain down on the right hand side, headed for it, pulled it aside.

No one was sitting at the table.

'Well,' Nyssa said. Her voice was carefully neutral. 'That's good. I'm going back.'

Tegan nodded, not looking away. Tut the kettle on?'

'All right,' Nyssa said. She went back down the corridor.

Tegan slipped through the curtain, walked down the length of the table. By its head, she put a hand down to where the inlaid marble gleamed smooth and cool. It had been washed recently... but not so well that Tegan couldn't see, caught in the cracks of the inlay, the remains of a dark staining that weren't going to come out of the grout.

She sighed. She understood more clearly now the Doctor's daily fear: that the ice of time might crack under your feet, spilling you into some new version of itself that you would forever know was your fault. If the Doctor sometimes seemed a little frayed around the edges, maybe this was why. He feared to bear his weight too hard on any square foot of history, lest he hear that first soft irremediable crack. *But he still acts,* Tegan thought. *Even though he always feels this hanging over him.*

It was the most straightforward kind of valour. She shook her head, smiling. *He's a hero,* Tegan thought. *I just hope I can keep up.* And she

went out of the hall, making her way towards the TARDIS and tea.

Down at the other end of the hall, a Time Lord stood in the darkness before the throne of the Master of the West. The guards had been sent away. Torch-flames fluttered weakly in the shadows. Only the light in the brazier near the throne burned steady, throwing a dull red light up into the face of the man who sat there. The red glow caught in the Doctor's eyes too, making them look older than usual, and caught like fire in the fair hair.

'Now tell me why you did what you did,' the Doctor said, 'bearing in mind how little time I had to say anything to you.' He glanced behind him towards the banqueting hall.

'Because I understood by watching you,' Theodoric said, 'that the old ways of doing things — intimidation, killing — aren't always workable.

Real power may lie in being kind to the weakest and smallest things. Or

the youngest.'

The Doctor blinked. 'Then why is Odoacer still dead?'

Theodoric shook his head. 'Because there are some on whom kindness is wasted. I wasn't one. But to the man in there, kindness was weakness — a failing to be exploited, the result of a childhood spent as a

hostage to the "decadence" of the east.' He laughed softly. 'Never having

lived in the eastern court, he had no idea that decadence didn't usually

mean kindness, but swift, thoughtless cruelty. I admit to cruelty, Doctor.

But I think about mine, because I understand the alternatives. I tried a

long time to teach Odoacer differently. Then, a couple of months ago, I

gave up. I had long since learned what the bunny wanted.' His smile was

grim. 'Or thought it wanted. Odoacer intended to trap me into a

partnership in which my part was to legitimise his occupation of Italy. So I

let him have that.'

Theodoric sighed, reached down beside his chair to put aside the

beaker sitting on top of the chest holding his paperwork. 'But even the

appearance was too much for Odoacer's lieutenants, who'd always

intended to use our apparent joint rule to despoil the peninsula. They

tried to kill me at the banquet last night. I had to pre-empt them — taking

the action I'd long feared I must to prevent the destruction of things that

will be needed to build the new west, the new cities. You said their

names, last night. Munich. Vienna. London? Is that really that little

riverside town in the Tin Isles, all mud flats and reeds, the one Boudicca

destroyed?'

The Doctor simply nodded.

'Then that will be a great city, someday... because that man you found in the banqueting hall is dead.'

'You overheard that?' the Doctor said. 'We thought we were private.'

'Privacy is a concept I hope will have leisure to grow,' Theodoric said. 'I've stayed alive as long as I have by becoming good at seeing and hearing things no one expected me to see or hear. Hidden doors, or words...'

The Doctor nodded. 'I wish, all the same, that this could have been avoided.'

'It could not,' Theodoric said. 'I saw what they tried to do to you, when I was little. I saw how easily a good man could have been rendered so much cold meat by the fear and blindness of those who love power too much to see anything else. I remembered that while I grew up, learning the world. I became determined that when such people crossed my path and threatened what I worked for, they would not have a chance to hold what mattered hostage. Those words, that idea, I have never forgotten.'

The Doctor swallowed, saying nothing.

'Meanwhile,' Theodoric said, 'I have never forgotten your kindness to a little boy and his pet. Or the ladies' wit and courage. I can tell you now that the fury of the Witch-Queen Tegan of the Brisbanes was the talk of

the court for months. Princess Ariadne never quite recovered from the idea that someone didn't care she was the emperor's daughter.' He

smiled. 'I won't be surprised if you don't care to linger. However, before you go — '

He reached down to the chest, flipped its lid open, reached down into it. The Master of the West stood up from his curule chair and went to the Doctor, holding out to him something at first hard to see in the torchlight.

The sudden scent made the Doctor's eyes widen. In his hand, Theodoric the Great held a stalk of celery. 'It's just coming into season here,' said the Master of the West. 'And you were right: they called it selerion.'

A little while later the Doctor walked into the TARDIS, shut the door behind him, and stood there for a moment, looking at the celery stalk in his hand. After a moment he smiled and fastened it to his lapel, then looked up at Nyssa and Tegan where they stood by the console. And his eyes widened in surprise.

Tegan stared. 'What's the matter with you?' she said. Then she saw where he was looking.

On the spot previously occupied by the Crown of the Byzantines now stood four rather dusty jars.

The Doctor picked one up and blew the dust off as he examined the label, which featured the face of an Earth-based film star with a penchant for sauce-making.

Nyssa plucked the jar out of his hands. 'Come on, Doctor. Lunch!'

'More like dinner, surely — '

'Don't start,' Tegan said, picking up the other three jars. 'Let's go. And one question: before you went looking for the sauce, did you ever find the spaghetti?'

'Well, now that you mention it...' the Doctor said, and realised that he was talking to an empty console room.

82

Good Queen, Bad Queen,

I Queen, You Queen

Terri Osborne

An adventure of the Fourth Doctor, with Romana and K-9

No sooner had the TARDIS materialised than Romanadvoratrelundar, Time Lady and all-round temporal couture aficionado, had figured out precisely what attire she would wear. It had taken a while to even obtain an educated guess as to where and when they were headed, as her travelling companion had installed a randomiser on the TARDIS controls to keep them hidden from the rather vengeful Black Guardian. The Doctor may have had his drawbacks — and she had been warned

about

his eccentricities by the White Guardian, Inquisitor Darkel, Borusa and

(for that matter) everyone she'd ever encountered at the Academy who'd

known of the Time Lord's escapades — but he could be quite resourceful

when necessary. That resourcefulness certainly hadn't been taught at

the Academy, and it was just the sort of real-universe knowledge that

Romana was beginning to appreciate for herself.

‘Romana?' the Doctor called from the control room. 'We're here.' Was

your extrapolation correct? Are we on Earth?'

'Of course my extrapolation was correct.'

Romana tried not to smile at the indignant tone in the Doctor's voice.

He could also be rather melodramatic when he wanted. 'Need I remind

you of Calufrax? And are we *when* you suspected we'd be? First century

Earth?'

'Yes,' he said, terse as always when she asked one too many

questions of him. 'I believe we're right before the height of the Roman

Empire. And I was right about Calufrax. What's taking you so long?'

One day I will understand his fascination with this tiny little planet.

Romana quickly changed from her favourite long white dress into a

white linen tunica. On top of that she donned an ecru stola with its

intricate gold clasps on each shoulder, followed by a wrap-like palla —

white, but edged in an exquisite shade of indigo — over her shoulders.

After lacing her feet into a pair of ornate Roman sandals, she strode back into the control room, pinning her dark hair into place with jewelled hairpins as she walked.

'You're certain?' Pointing her silver hairbrush at the randomiser's place on the console, she said, 'If someone with the Black Guardian's abilities can't tell where or when we're going, how could you?'

'Well, it is my TARDIS,' he said, rubbing a hand through his curly brown mop of hair. 'Why wouldn't I know where it's taking us?'

'A TARDIS always bonds with its master, yes. But even a computer set for — '

Before she could finish the sentence, the Doctor triggered the shutters that covered the scanner. They opened like eyelids after a long

night's slumber. She supposed that was what they were — anthropomorphically speaking, of course — the TARDIS-eye view of the world where they'd landed. She'd already seen quite a bit through that eye, but this time, the view it gave her was of a lush, verdant forest.

'Excellent camouflage, no?' he asked, one eyebrow arched.

'It would be better if the trees weren't trying to conceal a large, blue police box. You do have a reason to get the chameleon circuit repaired.'

'Yes,' he said, turning serious. 'But going back to Gallifrey now would be suicide.'

Romana grudgingly nodded. 'True. That would be the logical place for the Black Guardian to turn topsy-turvy to find us. Can't be the only place in all of space and time for a TARDIS repair shop, though, can it?'

The look on the Doctor's face strongly suggested she should not press the subject any further. So, pinning the last strand of hair into place, she gestured towards the TARDIS door. 'Perhaps we should see what's out there?'

‘K-9?' the Doctor called.

The robotic dog was, as usual, quick with his response. 'Yes, master?' 'Stay here. Keep an eye on the sensors for any sign the Black Guardian might have followed us, all right?'

'Affirmative, master.'

'Good dog.'

Once the Doctor had his striped scarf and brick-red tweed topcoat, they stepped through the door and headed for a clearing that was barely visible in the otherwise dense grove of trees. As they slowly stepped closer, the sunlight revealed the outlines of small huts. The beginnings of masonry walls, the loose mortar of a bricklayer who was only sussing out the process for the first time — yes, the signs were there. 'That must be a camp up there,' the Doctor said, tut is it Roman, or Briton?'

Romana pulled herself into her most regal bearing. If it were Roman, perhaps that would make infiltrating the camp much easier. *You are*

picking up a few things from the Doctor, aren't you? Ignoring the voice in the back of her mind, she gently lifted the hems of her stola to keep them from gathering too much mud, and stepped towards the camp, the Doctor not far behind.

The King was dying.

She knew it. The entire Iceni people knew it.

But there was nothing any of them could do. Prasutagus had taken a sword's point in his right side defending the Druids in a vicious skirmish to keep the Romans from reaching the sanctuary at Anglesey. But it wasn't enough. He'd barely made it back to the camp alive. The stories Prasutagus had told of the destruction wrought by Gaius Suetonius Paulinus and his troops were nothing short of utter brutality. Not even the most gifted workers of the ancient magicks — if any had managed to survive such an assault — could help her husband now. His life was in the hands of higher powers than even the priests could muster.

The Roman dogs are destroying every bit of the heart and soul of this land. And we allowed them to come to our door.

Oh, she'd seen it coming. From the moment he'd said he was going to take reinforcements to Anglesey, she'd wanted to keep him at home, safe with their people. But he would not listen to any reason that she attempted. Even their two daughters' pleadings fell on deaf ears. He

knew what the people needed of him, and there was nothing she could do to change that.

As she pulled her waist-length red hair into a cinch at the nape of her neck, a lesson from her youth played in her mind. *If heroes do not exist, it is necessary to invent them. Good for public morale.*

And her people certainly needed more of those heroes now. She turned to her daughters, their wide-eyed faces watching her every move from across the small hut's dirt floor, envying them their innocence in all of this, even though it could not possibly last. 'Watch carefully, my younglings,' she said, stepping over to them. Each hand found its way to one of her daughters' shoulders. 'We must take up your father's battles when he can fight no longer. Our people need their king and queen.'

Brushing a stray lock of strawberry-blonde hair back from her eldest daughter Alaina's face, she said, 'And they need their princesses even more. Remember, nothing they do to you can change that you are the princesses of the Iceni, my daughters, and the beloved of the one true king of all we survey.'

'My love,' Prasutagus said, the smooth and seductive voice that had convinced her to stay with him so many years ago turning more towards the sound of sand scratching against glass now.

Her heart ached at the loss of that voice. She tried not to remind herself that that ache would only get worse upon his death. 'Don't tire

yourself,' she said, trying to sound comforting. 'I know all I need to know.'

And she did, but she wasn't about to worry him with that. No. He would not die knowing what the Romans would do to his people. That was a subject for long after his passing.

Queen Boudicca could handle the Romans. No sense needlessly worrying a dying man.

He could continue believing that ceding half of Iceni lands to Rome on his death would appease them, and that they would allow her to be a client queen, as they had allowed him to be a client king.

Prasutagus, however, had grotesquely underestimated Rome's capacity for being — at its core — a backward culture by her standards.

Women held little, if any, identity of their own. They were nothing more than property to the men, chattels for the taking or trading. Existing to bring the future Roman soldiers into the world.

I will never be property. I was born for much more than that. And her daughters — she didn't want to think of what the Roman soldiers would do to them. A part of her wanted to send the girls north, perhaps to the Picts or across the water to some of her old contacts in Midhe, but the part of her who'd spent so many years with the Iceni knew that would

only be perceived as cowardice. No, they had to be resolute in the face

of Prasutagus's impending death. She had to be the queen he'd always wanted her to be. And if that meant keeping her daughters with the tribe to keep from showing fear, then so be it.

'Mummy,' Alaina softly asked, her green eyes tinged with fear. 'May I?' Boudicca smiled. 'Of course, youngling. Your father is quite ill, so you must be quick.'

The child nodded, slowly walking towards her father's bedside.

'Daddy.' Boudicca could hear the tears in her child's voice, even though there were none on those innocent features. 'Nicola and I will make sure the Romans never get through our lands alive.'

Prasutagus coughed, and then gave the girl a small smile. Alaina, remember, they will own half of our land. Don't try to stop them unless they command more.'

'We won't,' Boudicca said, her voice far more resolute than she felt. 'You can rest assured that if they try, there will be hell to pay.'

Her husband's smile widened. 'True daughters of the Iceni. Even you, my love. I could not be more proud. Let the Romans think we are the barbarians. We know the truth of the matter.'

Gently, Boudicca ushered Alaina and the quiet, wide-eyed Nicola out of the hut. 'Your father needs his rest,' she said, kneeling to meet them closer to eye-level. 'You may speak with him again tomorrow if he has

the strength. Why don't you take Nicola to check on the goats?'

'Yes, mummy,' Alaina obediently replied, heading off with her sister towards the small field where the domesticated animals roamed. If there was one thing in this world Nicola loved as much as her family, it was feeding those goats. Boudicca watched them walk off hand-in-hand, knowing that even their time was limited on this Earth.

Sometimes, the knowing made it all the more difficult. Still, she would do what needed to be done.

'Romans!' She could hear the perimeter guard's voice over the general din of the Iceni encampment. 'Romans!'

'We are most certainly not!' a female voice said, haughty and indignant. Boudicca barely heard a distinctly male voice say, 'You were the one who wanted to dress for the time period, Romana.'

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself as she reached for her sword. Prasutagus watched her, and she could see his fragile condition in his eyes. There was simply no way that he was going to meet any battle soon, and certainly not in that moment.

'Hullo?' the same male voice called from outside the simple hut. 'Is anyone else here?'

She exchanged a puzzled look with her husband. 'Rest. I will attend to the problem.'

Prasutagus gave her the slightest of nods before closing his eyes.

A tear rolled down Boudicca's cheek. She watched him draw one last,

deep breath, before he could no longer fight the pain. His chest did not,

and would not, rise again.

She hated the knowing.

She quickly stepped to the bed, kissing her husband's forehead.

'Goodbye, my love.'

Adjusting the rope-tie of her everyday stola to a spot a bit more comfortable on her hips should fighting be necessary, she shifted the grip of the sword in her hand. One thought filled her as she walked through the tent's door into the midday sun. *It begins.*

Romana wanted to take the Doctor's scarf and wrap it around his mouth several times to shut him up, but she knew it would be fruitless.

He would still try to find a way to try to talk them out of this mess.

More like talk me out of this. Oh, what was I thinking? 'Never interfere with history, Romanadvoratrelundar. Always appear to be one of the natives.' Stupid, stupid girl. If I ever get back to the Academy...

The Iceni guards were making sure that the Doctor couldn't even reach for his sonic screwdriver. Romana, not for the first time since joining forces with the Doctor, thought it might be a good idea if she constructed a similar device of her own. While they might have found it in

her Roman attire, the odds of them expecting a woman to carry a useful

tool were somewhere between slim and nil.

Before they could get further into the camp, a tall woman with fiery red hair, wearing a multicoloured tunica under a simple brown stola that had been cinched at her waist with what looked to be hemp, welcomed them.

If approaching them with a sword at the ready could truly be considered a welcome. Romana took an involuntary step back. 'We come in friendship.'

'Who are you?'

The Doctor, as usual, put on his most winning smile and stepped forward. 'Why, yes, I'm — ' He was quickly stopped by the woman bringing the point of her sword to his chest. 'No further. I understand. Well, I am the Doctor, and this,' gesturing towards her without allowing his gaze to waver from the sword, 'is my companion, Romana.'

One red eyebrow wavered. ‘Romana? As in Roman?' There was more than a touch of distaste in the woman's voice as she spoke.

Romana looked down at her clothes once more, her guilt giving a blush to her features. 'No, I'm not Roman. My given name is Romanadvoratrelundar.'

‘Romana for short,' the Doctor added with a wide smile. 'We have come to this era in peace.'

A puzzled look crossed the redhead's face. 'This era? Peace? Do you know where you are?'

The Doctor looked at the field that surrounded them, taking in the occasional tent and campfire. 'Let's see, heather, the lovely lemon aroma of agrimony.' His eyes closed for a moment, and when they re-opened, he proclaimed, ‘Iceni territory. North of Londinium, if I'm correct.'

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'You certainly know your flora, Doctor.'

Romana noticed the Doctor raising an eyebrow. 'And you are?' he asked.

She gave him the slightest of nods. 'I am Boudicca, queen of the people who surround you.'

And surround them the Iceni certainly did. Romana counted at least ten swords pointed at her alone. 'Wait a moment,' Romana began, ‘Boudicca? As in the Boudicca?'

'Aye. To my knowledge, there is no other,' the queen replied. 'Doctor, we should leave,' she said.

The Doctor, however, had wandered over to a small hut and ducked his head inside. 'Your husband has been killed?'

The expression that crossed the queen's face was a mixture of impatience, grief, and annoyance. 'Yes.' Adding a glare in Romana's direction, she said, 'Killed at Roman hands defending the Druids.'

Ah, the Druids. So full of belief in the value of nature.

'Shame about Anglesey,' the Doctor said, almost as though he were finishing Romana's thought. With a gesture towards where two young

girls were feeding what looked like domesticated goats, he added, 'What

will happen to your daughters?'

Romana couldn't help but note a curious sort of familiarity between

the Doctor and Boudicca, one that she hadn't seen from him before,

even towards his own kind. As the Doctor asked his question, the sword

in Boudicca's hand slowly lowered. 'I do not know,' she said.

Something about the sombre expression on the woman's face stayed

with Romana. 'You don't have a back-up plan?' She slowly began

lowering her hands. 'A safe house where they can stay until the fighting

is over?'

'I thought about that, child,' Boudicca said. 'But we cannot allow the

Romans even the spectre of victory. To send my children out of harm's

way would be to deliver the Iceni to Roman hands myself. Without

Prasutagus or the Druids, the troops will look to us — to me — for

guidance.'

Romana bristled at the use of 'child', but said nothing. The Doctor

began pacing, and Romana could tell he was plotting something. 'We

can't.'

'We can't not,' he said. He turned to Boudicca, that conniving look

lighting his eyes. 'How many troops do you have at the ready?'

'Not enough,' she said. 'The Roman legions would tear them apart.'

Romana braved a step forward. The sword didn't rise back up to stop

her. 'Then join forces. Surely there must be other tribes in this area

you

could ally with. There is strength in numbers. If all the tribes —'

Boudicca's eyes shot back towards the hut. 'They would never ally

themselves with a client of Rome.'

'A client?' Romana asked. 'What do you mean?'

Boudicca looked at her as though she'd grown a second head.

The Doctor, instead, said, 'Client kingdoms, Romana. The rulers were

allowed to retain control over their domains, but Rome demanded a cut

of the action, as it were.' Turning towards Boudicca, he said, Tor as long

as the client king lived. Then they took over. They will take your

kingdom.'

'They can try,' she said. 'By my husband's decree, the lands of the

Iceni will be split between Rome and our daughters.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'That won't be enough for them.'

'It shall have to be,' Boudicca said. 'Otherwise they show no respect

for our laws or beliefs.'

Romana tried to remember her ancient Earth history. Oh, she'd gotten

a triple first in that as well her other classes, but that had been years,

and perhaps one too many trips through time, ago. 'The Romans are

patrilineal. They won't allow your daughters to inherit anything. They will

take the Kingdom, and they won't care about your laws or beliefs.'

Boudicca brandished the sword once more. 'Then they will have the Iceni to battle.'

'Are you prepared to die for this?' the Doctor asked. Raising his voice so the warriors who still surrounded them could hear, he added, 'As their queen, are you truly prepared to lay down your life beside theirs for your land?'

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Romana heard a rumble in the distance. As the sound got closer, she was able to discern the neighs of horses and the clatter of hooves.

'Romans!' the guard called once again. 'The governor's men approach!'

'Well, that was quick,' the Doctor said. 'Can't imagine what they might be about, can you, Romana?' She couldn't ignore the dark tone of irony in his voice.

It did seem fast, even to her. The warriors around them separated, making way for the horses and their riders to approach. Romana watched as the three horsemen approached, two with purple stripes of the royal guard in the tunica under their armour, the third wearing a white toga edged in the same brilliant shade. The two legionaries stood at attention as the prefect dismounted from his horse. The prefect was an older gentleman who bore a disconcerting resemblance to paintings she had seen of Lord Rassilon back at the Academy.

'Prefect,' Boudicca said, her voice as emotionless as Romana could imagine it ever being. 'Your timing is, as always, excellent.'

The man gave Romana a nod before turning his attentions to Boudicca and the Doctor. 'We received word that Prasutagus was wounded in Anglesey and returned here to recover. I merely wanted to pay a visit and extend my wishes for a quick recovery.'

Boudicca's laugh was edged with bitterness. 'You would. You are like Suetonius. He could not have picked a better prefect than you, Hilarius.'

The Doctor smiled, and Romana could tell that he was trying his best to remain sombre. 'Prefect,' he said, 'I'm afraid that Prasutagus will be unable to spare a moment.'

'And you are?" Hilarius asked.

'The Doctor,' he said, bowing with a flourish. Romana tried not to roll her eyes. 'I'm a friend of the queen.'

Boudicca simply arched one bright red eyebrow and said, 'Yes. He is newly arrived from the Brigantes, prefect. He and his companion have come to pay their respects.'

Hilarius walked over to where the Doctor stood, an austere but condescending look on his otherwise robust features. 'You are Brigantine? I have yet to see such disrespectful attire in any tribe of the Britons.'

Romana stepped forward. 'My lord,' she said, checking her tone for just the right level of deference as she spoke, 'The Doctor is from an isolated tribe. I am afraid they value intelligence over symbols of proper Roman status. I apologise for his infraction and will see to it myself that it is not repeated.'

The prefect's eyes landed on Romana, and she felt as though she were being sized up like a piece of meat at the butcher's. 'And you are?'

‘Romana.'

A slight smile turned his lips. 'An excellent name. Even if it belongs to a woman who knows not her place.'

Her jaw hardened, and she hoped that the prefect couldn't see it.

‘Romana,' the Doctor began, a commanding tone that she hadn't heard that often in his voice. 'Why don't you go and help Boudicca with the children? With Prasutagus's death, she will require assistance.' That got Hilarius's attention. 'Prasutagus is dead?'

'Yes,' Boudicca replied, her grip on the sword's hilt visibly tightening. 'And according to the King's wishes, half of the Iceni lands are ceded to Rome. I have the document signed by Suetonius himself. The rest belong to my daughters, the rightful heirs of the Kingdom.'

'We shall see about that.'

It took the prefect a matter of moments to get back on his horse, and lead the two guards out of the encampment. Romana watched them

go,

knowing this was only the beginning.

When the Doctor and Romana returned to the Iceni village the next

day — Romana having chosen a far more practical dress and matching

boots for the occasion — it was to the sound of screams and everything

being torn asunder. Roman centurions were pillaging their way through

the village, jewels, clothing, heirlooms, even what passed for furniture in

the huts, all nothing more than plunder to whoever was able to grab the

most objects of value and escape.

Screams and the cries of death just kept coming from the

encampment, and it was all Romana could do to keep from running into

the battle to try to find the children. The Doctor's arm held her back. 'I

don't think you're ready to regenerate just yet,' he said. 'I know I'm not.

We have to let this happen, Romana. It's a fact in the timeline. We can't

change it.'

'But, the children, Doctor,' Romana said. She hoped she didn't sound

too pleading. 'They'll kill the children.'

'Not yet, they won't,' he said. 'They've got far more horrid things in

mind than that.'

Romana's eyes widened. The sound of a whip striking flesh made its way to her ears. A woman's moaning began to accompany each crack of that whip. Roma = forced her eyes closed, for she knew it was Boudicca being punished for having the audacity to stand up to Rome.

Finally, the screaming and whip-cracking stopped, and they heard the sound of horses riding away.

As soon as she could no longer hear the centurions, Romana broke from the Doctor's grasp and ran towards the hut that had housed Boudicca and her daughters. There, she found the girls curled up in balls as far away from the bed as they could, tears flowing like nothing Romana had ever seen before. The bed was covered in blood, as was almost every open surface in the vicinity.

When Romana realised that a heap of red hair and dark linens damp with blood was Boudicca's limp body, she knelt down and immediately checked the woman's neck for a pulse. Boudicca was still alive, but her back was littered with garish slashes from where the whip had clawed its way into her skin.

'Boudicca?' Romana gently asked, hoping the woman was still conscious. Giving her a slight shake, Romana repeated the inquiry a bit louder.

'Mummy?' the eldest of the girls weakly asked in between sobs.

The Doctor chose that point to step into the hut. 'She'll be all right,' he said. 'But we need to keep up the appearance that she's strong and in charge.'

Romana looked up at him, intent upon asking just how he planned to reanimate the nearly-dead body, when it occurred to her what he was thinking. 'I don't know if we have wigs in the wardrobe.'

'Do you think you could do it if we did?'

Romana shook her head, more in disbelief than anything else. 'The Iceni will know I'm not her.'

'We need to keep people's hopes up while they recover,' the Doctor said. 'I'm certainly not about to be a convincing version of Boudicca.'

'And I am?'

The Doctor raised one eyebrow. 'Have I taught you nothing? You had the prefect convinced you were Roman. All you have to do is be yourself.'

Romana stared in trepidation at her reflection in the wardrobe mirror. Not only had there been wigs in the wardrobe, there had been a variety of them, the likes of which not even she could have imagined. She'd found one that was very close to the colour and length of Boudicca's hair, and managed to get all of her dark hair buried under the wig.

She merely had to request the proper time period and planet to get a

tunica that resembled the multicoloured one Boudicca had been wearing

when they'd first met, only Romana requested it a bit longer to account

for Boudicca's height instead of her own. A hemp rope belt, and —

thanks to the length of the tunica — a pair of properly-configured boots

with heels that brought her closer to Boudicca's height, but still looked

like the flat- soled boots the woman wore.

What am I doing? How did I allow him to talk me into this?

'Romana?' the Doctor called from the control room. 'Are you ready?'

How his voice echoes through these halls. I wonder if mine will do the

same when I get my own TARDIS?

'Yes, Doctor,' she said, walking back through the halls and trying

desperately to keep her balance on the rather high-heeled boots. 'This

can't possibly work, you know.'

When she walked into the control room, she was greeted by the

Doctor and Boudicca, who was lying face down on an antigravity

stretcher. 'Doctor! Are you sure it's good for her to be here?'

'Don't you trust me?' he replied.

'I thought I did.'

'Go out there and lead her troops. I'm going to place her in the Zero

Room to help her recover.'

Romana raised a dyed-red eyebrow, 'The Zero Room? Are you mad?'

The Doctor stepped over and grabbed the handle of the stretcher. 'Would

you want someone to stumble upon her and question your authority?

She'll be safer in there than in the camp. Only until she recovers.'

While she watched, the Doctor gently took the stretcher down the corridor, disappearing around a corner. 'Don't forget to add a modulator to that torque!'

Sighing, Romana grabbed a voice modulator from a storage roundel just inside the TARDIS door, calibrating it to allow her voice to match Boudicca's. Finding a small patch of skin just under the heavy gold torque around her neck, she placed it there.

A part of Romana wanted to stay until he returned and ask precisely what was going on, but another part of her proved the more sane. Accusing the Doctor of hiding something from her wasn't exactly the wisest move she could make.

She didn't care for ancient Roman Britain enough to remain there for the rest of her lives.

Instead, Romana walked out of the TARDIS and made her way back to the camp. There, she found Boudicca's daughters, still sobbing in their hut, but they'd at least managed to uncurl enough to hold each other for support. Their tunics were ripped and Romana felt a tear roll down her cheek. How could the Romans be so brutal to two children?

Taking a deep breath, she slowly walked towards them, and whispered, 'It's alright. I'm here to help.'

The youngest, who couldn't have been more than five human years of age, reached out and touched the wig. 'You look like mummy. But not

mummy.'

Romana pressed her lips together, trying hard to keep herself together. When she finally felt she could, she said, 'That's right. Your mummy is resting in a very safe place. When she's better, she will be back, I promise. Until then, I am going to need your help, all right? Are

you able to help?'

The girls looked at each other, and the eldest nodded. 'Yes.'

Romana's hearts warmed at the looks in the girls' eyes. They trusted her. Even after everything that had happened to them, these two girls were willing to put their faith in someone they barely knew, let alone a

Time Lady only a few months out of the Academy. *Your triple firsts never*

prepared you for this, did they?

'No,' she whispered to herself, 'but life did.'

Turning her attention back to the girls, she asked, 'What are your names?'

‘Alaina,' the eldest girl said, then pulled her younger sister closer, 'and Nicola.'

Romana smiled at them. 'My name is Romana. But I need you to call me "mummy" until your mother heals. Can you do that? Will you help me

protect your mummy?'

Nicola's wide eyes seemed hesitant for a moment, and then she

nodded.

Once her younger sister was committed, Alaina nodded as well.

'Good,' Romana said. 'Now, we have a lot of work to do.' Romana

walked over to a small pool of mud in the hut's floor, and tried to ignore

the fact that it was most likely moist from blood rather than water. 'Help

me look like you do. Take this dirt and put it all over me.'

She tried not to laugh at the bizarreness of it all. But it was difficult.

The girls were slapping handfuls of mud all over her tunic, arms, legs

and even into the wig. Romana, however, took account of muddying her

own face. A stripe of mud here, a bloody, muddy handprint there, and

Nicola pronounced her looking more like her mother.

Romana wasn't sure whether to be proud or frightened. But she knew

one thing; she'd heard the girls laugh while they'd covered her in mud.

As she looked down at Alaina and Nicola, she knew that they would

eventually recover from this. It would take time, but psychologically, they

would be fine.

‘Boudicca!' a decidedly male voice yelled from outside.

Romana picked up the woman's sword and tried her best to mimic

how she'd brandished it. Taking a deep breath, she stalked out of the

hut, Alaina and Nicola at her hems. 'We will fight!' she shouted, raising

the sword into the air to punctuate her decree. 'The Romans will pay for

this,' she said, feeling it far more than she expected. 'They will pay for

stealing Iceni land!'

Slowly, a mass of people, both male and female, gathered in the

centre of the encampment. The sight of the women willing to fight and

die heartened Romana. It helped bolster her confidence, and helped her

begin to believe that they might be able to pull this ruse off until Boudicca

got better. It would only be a few days, but in that time, Romana knew

she had the hardest task of all.

She had to get the tribes of Britons to work together to remove the

Romans from the land. She couldn't allow a massacre like this to happen

to any other tribe.

'My people,' she said, 'we cannot do this alone.'

That got a rumble going in the crowd.

'We must work together,' she yelled, both to be heard over the din,

and to reinforce her position of authority. 'We must make amends with

the other tribes. We cannot bring Rome to her knees without their help.

Will you follow me? Will you help me make them pay for what they have

done this day?'

A resounding cheer sounded through the remnants of the Iceni tribe.

Lowering her sword, Romana proceeded to gather messengers to send to each of the nearest tribes. She sent three men each to every tribe she could remember, the Trinovantes, Corieltauvi, Cornovii and even the Silures — who one of the surviving Iceni had suggested as they'd fought the Romans successfully before. Each team was sent with a message requesting an envoy be sent to the Iceni. If she could pull this off, it would effectively cut off Roman control of lands north of Londinium, and possibly even bring the Roman occupation of Britain to an end.

If she could pull this off.

'Doctor,' Boudicca whispered, her voice horribly scarred from crying out as she'd been beaten. 'Doctor?'

She lifted her head to find that she was resting on air, and around her were white circles, softly shaded in pink, but there was nothing else in the room. Nothing at all.

Boudicca swallowed hard, moving her arm in hopes that she'd been there long enough to heal.

The screaming pain that accompanied that motion was enough to keep her from attempting such a thing again.

'Doctor!'

'Right here,' the man said, with more than touch of humour in his

voice. 'You shouldn't move. This room is very susceptible to the thoughts

of its occupants. It's meant to be a place for you to recuperate. Relax,

and allow the room to do its work.'

'How can such a thing be?' she asked, forcing all of her muscles to

once again relax. She picked a spot where two pieces of whatever it was

that comprised this room joined together in the floor and focused her

attention there.

'Simple,' the Doctor said. 'It removes any influence of the universe

around it. Time, space, they are held at bay. Here, you can heal without

fear of the Romans returning.'

'What about my daughters?'

‘Romana is tending to them. She may be young, but she's a quick

learner. They will be in good hands.'

'The Romans — ' Boudicca began, running out of energy and

tolerance for the pain in her throat halfway through.

'They're being taken care of,' the Doctor said. Boudicca couldn't help

but note that there was a ruthlessness in his voice that she would not

have pictured in what little she knew of the man. ‘Romana has sent

envoys to each of the tribes surrounding Londinium. She's working on

bringing the Britons together to fight off the yoke of Rome.'

Boudicca smiled. 'Good.'

'And the armies will be ready for you to lead when you are healed. Rest, allow the bandages to work, and you will be back out there fighting the Romans soon enough.'

'Thank you,' Boudicca whispered, before allowing sleep to take her once again.

Romana looked at her reflection in the TARDIS wardrobe's full-standing mirror. She still thought she looked like a half-crazed lunatic who'd run through a muddy bog about a dozen times and then been strung out to dry. *How are they going to believe me? How do I get all of those tribes together to fight a battle they can't possibly win?*

That was when she remembered something from her TARDIS education classes. Wait. The *TARDIS can work telepathically. It translates for me out there.* She looked around at all of the clothing that hung on the racks around her. *You can shape reality in here. Can you do it out there as well?*

Romana mentally smacked herself. Of course it couldn't. It wasn't her TARDIS. She hadn't bonded with it. She was on her own in this. Pulling the hemp belt tight against her waist, she walked out into the makeshift encampment that was serving as the headquarters for her little summit meeting.

The Iceni have had good relations with the Trinovantes for ages, so they're going to be cordial. The Corieltauvi may not be, but they'll see

reason. The Cornovii will need convincing. The Silures, I can appeal to their egos. They've been successful before, they can be successful for the good of Britain again. This isn't an impossible thing.

Although whether or not the Trinovantes' envoy recognises that I'm not Boudicca, that will be the true test.

As Romana walked into the centre of the tribal circle and took in all of the representatives who had agreed to meet Boudicca, words began to fall into her mind, words that she hadn't conjured in her own head. 'My fellow people,' she began. 'We have been set upon by the treacherous dogs of Rome. They care nothing of our ways, or our beliefs.'

That set a rumbling of chatter through the collected representatives.

'We can change this,' Romana said, bringing a bit more force to her voice. 'Mark my words. If we do not, Rome will take whatever it wants. They already have the treasures of the Iceni. We who are left, we call to you for assistance with this battle. Revenge is a dish best served cold.

And I can think of nothing colder than the entire country turning its swords to invaders.'

More rumbling followed, until the leader of the Silures' delegation — a muscle-bound man roughly as tall as he was wide, and had the leather armour to cover it all — stood. 'And what can the Iceni offer the Silures

for their assistance?'

Romana stared directly into his eyes and coldly said, 'Your own lands under your own control.'

'We already have that,' the Cornovii's representative said. Romana could hear the wariness in his voice.

'You have the illusion of that,' she said, whirling around towards him. 'What happens when you die? Your heirs are no different from my daughters. What makes you so certain Rome will not do the same to you?'

The Silures' envoy folded his arms over his abundant chest. 'You ask for our assistance, yet you have nothing to offer us in return?'

Romana's eyes fell to the muddy ground between them. With the Iceni tribe decimated by the Roman assault, there just weren't enough of them to offer any kind of personnel. However, there just might have been enough... yes, if they tried. 'We offer one-fifth of our spring harvest in the coming year. My tribe has seen loss like we have never imagined. We farm far more than we can consume now.'

'What about Rome? They will try to kill all of us for this.'

Romana gave him a sly smile. 'Rome will not be here long enough to know of this alliance.'

A chatter between the other tribal envoys finally resulted in an agreement. The Iceni harvest would be split amongst the five tribes present. And in return, they would join Boudicca in seeking

retribution

from Rome for the violations inflicted on her and her daughters. They would join forces to drive the Roman influence from their shores, or they

would die trying.

Romana hoped against hope that the Zero Room was healing the queen as quickly as the Doctor had thought. He had been right about one thing; she wasn't ready for regeneration just yet.

Boudicca woke to warmth on her back, a sensation she didn't recognise. Her voice was a dry rasp as she said, 'What — ?'

She was still in the pink-white room, only this time the pink seemed a bit brighter than before. 'Doctor?'

A metal creature in roughly the shape of a dog rolled across the floor towards where she lay. 'The Doctor is occupied,' it said. 'He instructed me to watch over you. He thought you would be hungry when you awoke.'

Something extended from the metal dog's snout. With a hum, a tray slid out from the wall, with water, what looked to be mead, and an excellent platter of food. Boudicca slid off of the invisible bed she'd been

occupying, running her hand over what she expected to be a clear

pedestal, but only finding air. *It is there, yet not there, at the same time. I must find out how he managed that.*

Her stomach roared in hunger. She quickly grabbed the tray of food and drink and wolfed them down as though they were her last meal.

Was the meal sufficient?' the dog asked.

'What you have given me is quite sufficient, dog.'

'My designation is K-9, mistress.'

Boudicca smiled. 'Well then, what you have so generously given me is sufficient, K-9. I thank you.'

'You are welcome, mistress. The wounds on your back have healed. The Doctor asked that I let him know when you were prepared to return to your people.'

Boudicca's breath caught for a moment. Her people. Romana had been an interesting child, but surely she couldn't have pulled them together? The Silures alone would be enough to intimidate anyone not familiar with them. ‘If I am healed, then I am prepared, K-9.'

Romana leaned back, staring up at the dark, starry night sky. It was so tranquil when there weren't Romans trying to take her life. She'd already escaped four near-mortal wounds protecting Boudicca's daughters.

Well, near-mortal if she'd been human. Unfortunately, Alaina and Nicola were human. They were in a small chariot near the centre of the marauding unit, there to be protected on all sides as much as possible.

How could anyone lead wars day after day?

They had already burned their way through the Roman colonia at

Camulodunum as though the aging soldiers offered no resistance. Then

there'd been Verulamium and the other military posts between her troops

and Londinium.

Burning London. The Doctor would never forgive me if I did that. But

it's a fact of the timeline. London must burn.

'Romana?'

She leapt to her feet — sword at the ready — before she recognised

the voice. 'Doctor! Does that mean — ?'

'Yes, child,' Boudicca said. 'I am here.'

Romana whispered gratitude to a few deities before surrendering her

sword to its true owner. 'The armies are ready to attack at your order.'

Boudicca smiled, and Romana could see both disbelief and gratitude

in her eyes. 'You did this, Romanadvoratrelundar?'

Romana couldn't pull the red wig off fast enough. Running her fingers

through her own dark hair, she said, 'No, they did it for you. They also did

it for themselves.'

'But you convinced them to work together.'

'I merely convinced them that they were stronger together than they

were alone.'

Before another word could be spoken, two small projectiles ran over

and wrapped their arms around Boudicca's legs. 'Mummy!' both girls

said.

Boudicca looked at her daughters' bandaged wounds. 'What

happened?'

Romana pursed her lips, and then said, Alaina was hit by an arrow in

the attack on Verulamium. We got the arrowhead out, and she should be

all right in a few days. Nicola fell running from a centurion. Her bandages

are there to ensure nothing in her leg is broken.' With a small laugh, she

added. 'Judging by how fast she ran over here, I believe we may be able

to remove the bandages.'

Boudicca held her daughters tight. 'You may be correct.'

When the woman lifted her eyes to Romana, gratitude was written all

over her. Still, she said, 'Thank you. I am eternally in your debt.'

Romana took a deep breath. 'As am I in yours. What I have learned of

myself these last few days...'

I never really wanted to know my own tactical abilities. I never wanted

to lead people in battle. I never wanted to see what I've seen.

We can't always have what we want.

‘Romana,' the Doctor said, 'we should get going. There's a possibility

we've been here long enough for the Black Guardian — '

That snapped Romana's attention back to their own situation. 'Yes.

Boudicca, will you be all right?'

Romana knew the history, she knew that Boudicca would disappear

soon enough, and that centuries of debate over her fate would follow, but

still it would be good to hear the words.

'I believe that now I shall be fantastic,' Boudicca said. 'Now, we shall

burn London to its base, and we shall drive the Romans from our land

forever. You are more than welcome to remain with us during the

campaign, Romana. You have led us so far already.'

And stay with them for a bit longer they did, putting their own lives at

risk in the process. Romana returned to the TARDIS to gather clothing

less suitable for an Iceni rebel, and the two Time Lords watched from the

safest distance possible as Boudicca's forces sacked Londinium, burning

it to the ground.

Until finally, the rebels made it to Wading Street.

The battle was pitched, with Boudicca leading the war call. For every

Roman soldier Suetonius could muster, Boudicca had ten or more.

But it still wasn't enough.

The slaughter that the allied tribes had brought upon Rome to that

point was returned to them threefold. Even the Doctor sustained a

wounded arm fighting off a Roman centurion, before Romana dispatched

the assailant with the blade of a fallen Iceni warrior.

At Watling Street, it was over.

But, as Romana watched Boudicca try to hack her way through a

dozen Roman soldiers, taking more wounds than she had thought the

human capable, she knew that Boudicca would never admit defeat.

Javelins landed all around her, and Roman soldiers pushed forward with

their shields, trampling her warriors in the process.

'Boudicca!'

She heard Romana's call, and ran back towards where the two Time Lords had taken shelter behind a small thicket a hundred metres or so from the combat zone.

'Boudicca,' Romana said, 'come with us. You'll never survive this battle.'

Her head turned back to the battle so quickly that red locks hit the Doctor in the face. 'I have to,' she said. 'These are my people. If they are

to die, then I must die with them this day.'

Standing, the woman ran back to the battle, sword held high and calling for blood at the top of her lungs.

Romana lunged forward, trying — no, vainly wanting — to stop her from what was sure suicide, but the Doctor's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

'Romana,' he said, 'You remember what Borusa said back at the Academy?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'If heroes do not exist, it is necessary to invent them. Good for public morale.'

'This planet is notorious for making heroes out of martyrs. Come on,

let's go.'

The Doctor pushed the button on the TARDIS recall unit, causing it to materialise in the clearing behind them. In an instant, they were through the door and inside.

Romana leaned against the door, taking a deep breath. She could still faintly smell the greenery that was just outside. She could also hear the battle raging. 'Doctor, if we're going to go somewhere, then go.'

With a sombre look of his own, the Doctor wordlessly began the TARDIS dematerialisation process.

By the time the Doctor's TARDIS had vanished, Boudicca knew the war was lost. Her daughters were gone. Her husband, her tribe, her lands, everything was gone, lost to the godsforsaken Roman armies. Her body had been impaled so many times, she felt like a straw practice dummy.

Still, Boudicca searched the field of dead at Wading Street, until finally she found a woman of roughly her height and build. It took some doing, but she dragged the body into the remnants of an old hut and made certain it was wrapped as the rites of her people would demand.

There were so many dead. Too many. The death of their queen would go with great hue and cry. Her people had done great things in the last weeks thanks to Romana. They would never know that they had brought

the Romans to their knees. Britain wouldn't know that until long after everyone involved was long dead and their burial mounds places where children played.

With great care, she wrapped the body as the oldest rites she had been taught centuries before demanded. Perhaps the Romans were good for one thing: producing optimal linens.

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Boudicca could feel the energy begin to swell in her body, willing it to rise. Yes, it was time. But would she be able to finish the task before it arrived?

What story would she tell the survivors? She couldn't tell them the truth; they would never understand the concepts involved. They were hardly ready for it at that point. Try as she might, she had barely been able to get some of the men to understand the concept of time.

Poison. That was it. A poison took her from them.

Still, she continued wrapping the body in the strips of oil-soaked Roman linen. They would help it survive the centuries in the burial mound. *The story must be told.* Almost as if to ensure that would happen, she placed one of the wraps around the hilt of her own sword, binding it to the body that wasn't hers for all time.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered what name this woman, this ghost of her former life, had been given. It no longer mattered, for she would forever be Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, defender of her people,

and a scourge upon the Roman armies.

When the wraps were complete, she allowed the energies to come.

For some, the change was violent, painful, a thing to be feared and not

welcomed. She could feel the energies coursing through her veins. It

was a battle to control both of her hearts, keep them from exploding from

the raw power that each of her kind endured during the change.

Warmth like fire began spreading over her flesh, reshaping it, turning

into something that was still her, but someone else as well. Electricity

filled the air, and she could have sworn she smelled her own hair burning

from the discharge.

When it finally stopped, she reached back to grab her hair, if only to

see what colour it had become. She'd been a blonde, a grey-haired

crone and a redhead over the centuries. Now, her hair was black as

midnight. Her clothes, however, remained unchanged. She was briefly

thankful to the Fates for that, as it was high time she escaped while she

still had the chance.

She pieced together a makeshift travois, using two uneven posts that

had been discarded while the tent was being erected, and a layer of

blankets secured with strands of wool woven around the beams. Taking

a deep breath, she hefted the body onto the sledge and hauled it out to

the centre of the settlement. 'The queen! She has poisoned herself! What

are we to do?'

'You saw her do it it?' one of the tribal elders, a man named Hanson said, pulling the battered remnants of his tunic around him, almost as though he were using it for a security blanket. 'Did you not try to stop her?'

'It was already too late when I arrived,' she replied, thinking as quickly as she could. 'I stayed with her until her death.'

'How do we know you did not kill her yourself?'

She quickly reached for the wrap covering the woman's hand, revealing an enormous entrance wound from one of the Roman archers'

arrows in her upper arm. Brushing a few strands of the woman's copper-red hair aside, she directed their attention towards where purplish blue lines shot away from the wound and into other areas of her skin.

'Someone took a lesson from the Greeks. Who would shoot her with a poison arrow but the Romans? That is not our way.'

A faint sound appeared in the back of her mind, a voice, calling her true name. *Fimmilena, our time here is finished.*

I know. I'm coming.

It took a bit of convincing, but they finally accepted that the body in wraps was their queen and took it to their collective bosom for burial rites.

Once they were gone, she began walking towards the sunset.

It took her hours, but finally, she came to the stone circle of

Stonehenge. Running her hand along each stone as she walked around,

she got to the one that was out of place. With a touch, a panel slide

aside, and the door opened.

'Hello,' she said. 'Now, where shall we go next?'

With a sound that only she heard, her TARDIS dematerialised.

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The Price of Conviction

Richard C White

An adventure of the First Doctor, with Susan

'Where are we this time, Grandfather?'

'Don't take that tone with me, child. I know very well where we are.'

'Brilliant. The last time you said that some creatures tried to eat us.'

'A small navigational error, Susan, nothing of consequence. And yes,

I do know where we are now. We've returned to Earth.'

The dark-haired girl stared across the mushroom of glowing dials and flashing lights at her grandfather with a mixture of amusement and resignation as she watched him bring the TARDIS to a gentle rest.

Grandfather seems more comfortable among humans than he does even his own kind. Maybe that's why he's so fond of this planet.

The old man flipped a couple of switches and then stepped away from the panels, his hands naturally rising to grasp his lapels. 'There

you

go, a perfect landing! The chameleon circuit is working perfectly as well.

The adjustments I made on Epsilon Indri seem to have fixed that minor

malfunction.'

'I never doubted you, Grandfather. So, where are we this time?'

'Judging from the clothing, I'd say we're in Germany — probably early Renaissance — but let's observe them a bit to be sure, hmm? We want to blend in.'

'Very well, Grandfather.' Susan hid her disappointment behind a smile and turned towards the scanner. *I love travelling through the galaxies, but I hate having to dress up and pretend all the time. It's much more fun when I can just be myself.* She studied the scanner intently, noting mannerisms and style of dress, while her grandfather headed to his sleeping chambers, a self- satisfied smile on his face.

Susan examined the clothing hanging in a storage compartment near her bed. She could almost hear her grandfather's voice 'Of course we have to get dressed and go out! Observation isn't any way to learn, you

have to interact! Besides, you can't have adventures if you never leave home.'

She sighed as she finished dressing. *Adventure. That's all he talks about. Ever since we left Gallifrey, he's been so busy flitting about we never get a chance to actually make friends. It'd be nice to settle down for a little while, although...* She stared down at her clothing,

reconsidering. *I don't think I'd want to stay here too long.*

Returning to the control room, she was soothed by its familiar hum and ever-blinking lights. There was feeling of energy that ran not only through the TARDIS, but her grandfather as well. He seemed indefatigable, although she knew he was much older than his appearance would lead a non-Gallifreyan to believe. She caught a glimpse of herself in the dress of a merchant's daughter and grimaced. The costume certainly wasn't her first choice in attire, but it did prevent

uncomfortable questions when they ventured outside of the ship.

And go outside we will. Susan fidgeted with her petticoats and twisted her mouth to one side. *If I know Grandfather, he'll find something to stick his nose into. His curiosity will be the death of both of us one of these days. At least the TARDIS is fully operational for once.*

She turned as her grandfather's door opened, and watched him bustle over to her. He was dressed as a merchant and fussing with a small floppy hat askew on his head. 'Bother! Pity someone didn't teach them a simpler way to dress in these days.'

'Have you determined just when in time we are?'

'I believe so, yes. By my calculations, it's probably just after the turn of the sixteenth century. A time of upheaval with the start of the Reformation and then the Counter-Reformation. Nasty business, that.'

Susan nodded. 'Let's try to avoid getting into any nasty business

ourselves.'

'Of course, child, of course. I don't go looking for trouble you know.'

She bit back a comment even though he probably knew what she was thinking. As usual, he ignored her reaction and began hustling her towards the doorway. 'Come along, Susan. I'd like to look around before we find shelter for the night.'

She nodded and followed him out of the TARDIS, which had assumed the shape of a small shed attached to a building. Either it was mimicking the local architecture, or the TARDIS's proximity sensors had avoided disaster once again. The Doctor manipulated the lock to make the doorway difficult to see. The average passer-by wouldn't notice anything unusual.

'Come along, come along, don't dawdle.'

'Yes, Grandfather.'

They walked to the end of the narrow cobblestone street, where it joined the main thoroughfare. Susan paused to get her bearings, noting the large castle that dominated the town. ‘Ah, that way, I think,' the Doctor said, joining the bustling crowd.

Susan found herself hurrying to keep up with the white-haired man ahead of her. He seemed impervious to the bony elbows and knees that seemed to find Susan at will. If it hadn't been for his ridiculous cap, Susan would have lost sight of her grandfather several times as they

moved up the street. After what seemed like ages, he paused at one of the merchant's stalls and began examining the goods sitting on the rough wooden shelves. Grateful for the opportunity to catch her breath, Susan watched the maelstrom of humanity as it passed by. She always found Earth interesting, even when they visited times like this. The people, their customs, houses and styles of clothing combined to make trips to this planet some of her most enjoyable.

She looked up when her grandfather engaged a merchant in conversation. 'Seems like a rather large crowd today.'

'I should say so! Largest thing to happen in Worms in years. We haven't had crowds like this since the last time the emperor came

through!'

'You don't say. And what would this auspicious occasion be?'

The merchant gave the Doctor a curious look. 'You don't know?'

'We've only just arrived. Haven't even had time to find an inn yet.'

'You may be out of luck, with the trial and all. People have been coming from all over the empire to see it. The inns closest to the cathedral are stuffed full of Italian princes and priests. The crowds are a bit of a nuisance sometimes, but all in all it's been great for business.'

'So I see.' The Doctor glanced around, then addressed the merchant again. 'Who's being tried?'

Susan almost laughed at the merchant's thunderstruck expression.

'Where have you been, man? The pope has decided to excommunicate

Martin Luther! Not only that, the papal jurist is reputed to be one of the

sharpest minds in the empire.'

'We've been on the road a while,' the Doctor began before being

interrupted by a commotion on the street. A procession of armed men

forced an opening in the crowd to allow a carriage full of bishops to pass.

Susan nodded to herself, then turned to the merchant.

'There's a sort of... tension in the air.'

'Indeed, young lady.' The merchant looked at Susan's grandfather.

'Your companion is very perceptive.'

'Yes, my granddaughter has always had a good eye for detail. Now, I

believe I would be interested in these items.'

'You've got quite an eye yourself, sir. That'll be fifteen pfennigs.'

Susan watched as her grandfather felt around for a pouch she knew

didn't exist. They didn't carry Earth money with them any more than they

carried coins for any world they visited. However, precious metals, gems

and other items seemed to be valued no matter where their travels took

them.

'Ha-a-rumph. I seem to have misplaced my purse. Ah, no matter.

Would you be interested in this, my good man?'

The merchant's eyes widened as the Doctor pulled out a large clear

gem and sat it in the man's hand. Susan stifled another giggle as she watched the man's face. *I found a pile of those next to the TARDIS when we visited Aldebaran IV. I still remember the looks the local jeweller gave me when I asked him to make a necklace for me. The natives considered them worthless junk and couldn't understand why I wanted them made into jewellery.*

The merchant's face broke out in a sweat as he cupped the gem to hide it from anyone passing by. 'Sir, you should be more careful. There are people who make a living separating these things from their owners.

Come with me.

Susan exchanged a glance with her grandfather as the merchant disappeared behind the walls of his stall. Shrugging his shoulders, the Doctor stepped behind the small wooden counter and followed, with Susan close behind. Behind the stall was an alleyway leading between two dingy buildings.

The merchant motioned them closer. 'I will take you to my friend, Isaac. If you're serious about selling this, he can give you the fairest price in Worms. But hurry; I'm afraid someone may have observed you already.'

'I think you worry too much over a trifle.'

Susan winced. *Grandfather is so used to the TARDIS providing for*

us, he forgets how others value gems or gold. It's just like him to draw attention to us by trying to overpay.

The merchant took a quick glance down the alley before turning to the Doctor. 'Sir, you must come from a wealthy land or an honest one. Every thief in Worms would kill for such a gem! A man of your obvious wealth should not wander away from his bodyguards.'

'Bodyguards? Never saw any use in them.'

'Then you are either very brave or very foolish. But, enough of my blather. We need to find Isaac.'

The men took off down the alley, with Susan trailing. The alley soon led to a maze of narrow streets and cul-de-sacs. They passed other merchants and labourers who were clearly taking advantage of the hidden ways to avoid the crowding on the main streets. It was as if another city existed behind the first.

Susan was so enamoured with the sight she barely missed running into a pair of labourers as they lifted a large box right in front of her. She tapped her foot as she waited for the men to balance their load and move out of her way. Stepping to the side to let them pass, she glanced up the alley to see where her grandfather and his guide were.

There was no one in the alley ahead of her.

She felt an initial pang of panic but shook it off. *Come on, Susan. Clearly they turned down one of the alleyways ahead. If you hurry, you*

should be able to catch them. If not, you know where the TARDIS is.

Lengthening her stride as much as she could with her unaccustomed attire and the debris lining the way, she hurried down the alley. She paused at the first intersection. Nothing. She passed three more and still found no sign of the older man or the merchant. Pausing, she considered her dilemma. Ahead, the main alleyway was about to open up onto a large well-lit street. *Should I go back and check out the other alleys? I'm certain I didn't pass them anywhere.*

Dejected, she walked forward and sat down beside a large pile of crates. She was still debating her options when she heard voices on the other side. One was thin and wispy, reminding Susan of a cornered rat. 'I don't like it, Karl. He has a lot of supporters in town. If we get caught, we won't survive to get to jail.'

A deeper, more confident voice replied. 'Relax, Willie. Being in jail won't protect you from our employer. He could buy the jail seven times over. If we get caught, I think I'd rather be dead.'

'Things could go wrong.'

'Which is why we're getting paid a lot for this job. What's the life of a priest in the grand scheme of things? If he never makes it to the trial he

won't be able to spread his heresy from the witness box. A clean shot,

right through the heart then we're on our way to Wurtzberg to wait for our

pay.'

'That's another thing. How do we know he'll show up with the money?'

Susan shook her head. Willie just wasn't going to be pacified. She

shifted, trying to glimpse the two men, and sent a board clattering to the

ground instead. *Oh, that's done it! Time to go!* She leapt up and began

running down the alleyway, but they were too quick for her. She hadn't

gone more than a few steps before rough hands grabbed her shoulders

and spun her around.

'And where do you think you're going?' the deeper of the two voices

asked.

Susan glanced up and saw a cruel face looking down at her. Karl had

a crooked nose and scars on both cheeks. The niggle of panic returned,

but she lifted her chin gamely. 'Let me go. You have no right to touch

me.'

'Oh, it's a little princess we have here, Wilhelm.'

'Do you think she heard, Karl?'

'Of course she heard. Damn you for not keeping your big mouth shut.'

Since playing dumb was clearly not an option, Susan lashed out at

Karl, catching him in the groin with her knee. He let out a horrible yowl,

but loosened his grip enough for her to break free and begin running.

She'd hoped Wilhelm would back off since he seemed the weaker of the

two, but he surprised her, grabbing her around the waist and lifting her

into the air. Calling for help she tried to scratch and kick him, but he

avoided most of her attacks. Worst of all, Karl rose from the ground, fury

etched on his unpleasant face and drew a dagger from his belt.

'That kick is going to cost you, princess.'

'Grandfather! Grandfather, help!'

'Damn it, Karl. She's not alone.'

'It's a trick, Willie. Hold her still and we can get this over with.'

Susan stared at the large man, the dagger growing larger as he

approached. She prepared for one last scream when a voice rang out

behind Karl. 'You there! What are you doing to that young woman?'

Wilhelm threw Susan against the wall of the alley, stunning her.

Through the fog in her head, she heard the two men running into the

distance as someone rushed over to her. She sat against the wall, the

world spinning as a shadow fell over her.

'Are you all right?' The shadow had a soothing voice, but Susan was

having a hard time making out the face.

'I ... I think so.' Susan shivered as details of her ordeal washed over

her. 'Grandfather. Where is my grandfather?'

'Here, child. I'm right here. What have you done to my

granddaughter?'

'No, Grandfather. He saved me. It was two others... oh, it was

horrible.'

'There, there, child. It's all right now.' Her grandfather's shape swam

into focus as he assisted her to her feet. 'It seems I owe you quite a debt

of gratitude, young man.'

'Not at all. Just wish I had noticed a bit sooner. Could I escort you two

somewhere?'

Her grandfather looked at Susan and then up to the tall, blond man

standing next to him. 'Why yes, I think a place where she could sit down

and get a cool drink might be just the thing.'

The man got a perplexed look on his face. 'Well, it's really the wrong

time of year to get a cool drink, but I imagine the inn just down the street

here would have something.'

'Oh, yes. Yes indeed. Well, lead on, my good man.'

Susan leaned her weight against her grandfather's arm and walked

with careful steps. She'd been on enough 'adventures' to know she

probably didn't have concussion, but that didn't mean she wouldn't be

horribly sore later. As they walked, she took the opportunity to observe

her rescuer. *He can't be more than twenty-five. Handsome, too.*

Reaching the inn, the man led them to a booth in the back and went

to find the innkeeper. Susan took advantage of his absence to get her

grandfather's attention. 'The two men who attacked me were assassins.

I

overheard their plans.'

'And you accuse *me* of getting into trouble?'

'Grandfather! They want to kill the man who's going on trial before he can speak in his own defence.'

'That's probably not an uncommon thought just now. Martin Luther isn't very popular with the Catholic Church. This trial is one of the linchpins of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.'

'But, what shall we do?'

'Do? Why should we do anything, child? It's not our world, nor our history. We're under no obligation to solve problems. We're here to observe and enjoy.'

'Can't say I enjoyed being attacked in the alleyway.'

'I should think not, but... ah, here's our genial host. Thank you. Won't you join us?'

The blond man set the steins down on the table and then slid into the booth next to Susan. 'Thank you for the invitation. I was just happy to be

able to help out. I am Rudolf von Slesinger.'

'Pleased to meet you, Rudolf. You'll have to excuse us, but we're travelling incognito. I'm afraid some of my rivals would be interested in

where my travels take me. For now, you may call me the Doctor.'

Before Rudolf could comment on what her grandfather had said, Susan extended her hand to him. 'I'm Susan. Thank you again for

coming to my aid.

Rudolf took her hand in his and gave it a slight kiss. 'I hope those cutthroats didn't harm you?'

Susan felt her cheeks begin to redden. She started to tell Rudolf about what she'd overheard in the alley, but a sudden thump on the table drew her attention. Glancing at her grandfather, she recognised the look

that said *not now*. ‘No, just a small bump on the head is all. I should be fine after a good night's sleep.'

'I'm glad to hear that. Unfortunately, that may be difficult. The innkeeper tells me all the rooms here and the other inns near here are filled. Perhaps you'd care to spend the night in my home. There are plenty of rooms available.'

Before Susan could answer, her grandfather spoke. 'We appreciate the offer, but we couldn't impose.' Susan nodded as her grandfather stood and urged her to her feet. 'I think we should go now, Susan. We have some unfinished business in town.'

Susan gave Rudolf her best apologetic smile and hurried after her grandfather as he stalked off into the crowd in the inn. Belatedly he seemed to remember her injury and slowed down, allowing her to catch his arm. 'That was rude, Grandfather.'

'What? You don't you find it suspicious that this gentleman shows up,

rescues you from ruffians, befriends us and then wants to whisk us off to

some unknown place?'

'Grandfather, that man saved my life.'

'Perhaps. Still, there's more to him than meets the eye. I suggest we

hurry back to the Ship.'

'We're leaving?'

'Why not? If the tensions in town are as high as they seem, things are

likely to get much more dangerous.'

'But, what about the conversation I heard in the alley?'

'What about it? I told you, it's no concern of ours.'

Stepping into the sunlight outside the inn, Susan noticed a small

commotion. Before she realised what was happening, they were

surrounded by men in official garb, carrying halberds. One of the men

spoke. 'By order of the duke, you are under arrest. Please come with us.'

The Doctor turned to face the speaker. 'We've done nothing wrong.'

'Save your breath, old man. You can make your case to the chief

magistrate.'

'Well, I never. Very well, take us to him. I would like to get this

straightened out immediately.'

'Grandfather, what's going on?'

'There's obviously been a mistake, Susan. We'll get it sorted out.'

'Oh, there's been a mistake all right, but we didn't make it.' The

guard's comment evoked a peal of unfriendly laughter from his

companions. 'Now, are you going to resist the duke's command or are you going to come peaceably?'

'We'll be happy to co-operate, sir,' Susan said, stepping in front of her grandfather. Judging by the guard's deepening scowl as he turned and started marching off, he was hoping for resistance. Susan placed a hand on her grandfather's arm and led him along in the guard's wake. The other guards fell in behind them, their weapons resting lightly on their shoulders.

Susan noticed they were heading towards the entrance of the castle

that rose over the city. The guards paused for a moment to speak to the sentries and then proceeded into the darkened interior. Even with her headache, Susan watched the path they followed, in case they had a chance to flee. By the look of the castle's huge gates and thick walls there would be no easy escape.

I don't know what's going on, but Grandfather's going to have to be on his best behaviour to get us out of this.

The guards led them down a corridor and stopped outside a door. The leader turned to face them, and Susan was surprised how bored he looked. 'You'll wait here. The chief magistrate will be with you in a moment. Or he won't.'

The Doctor held the door open for her as she stepped into an

opulently furnished room. Tapestries hung from the walls and the centre

of the room was dominated by a huge oaken table. Susan wandered

around while her grandfather lowered himself into one of the chairs with

ill grace.

'Confound it. We don't have time for this! This town has been nothing

but a bother since we've arrived.'

'But why did they arrest us?' A hint of suspicion settled on Susan's

face. 'Did something happen while you were visiting the merchant?'

'No, child, I believe this has to do with the unfortunate incident in the

alleyway. Someone must have noticed and alerted the duke's men.

Although I must say I'm surprised. I doubt the duke is aware of every

mugging that goes on in the alleyways in this town.'

'Unfortunately, you're correct, Doctor. His excellency is usually too

busy with the affairs of state to involve himself in the lives of his people.

You, however, are a special case.'

Susan spun around at the familiar voice. Rudolf motioned to the

guards, who withdrew from the room with more deference than they'd

shown her grandfather and her. Rudolf settled into a chair nearby as the

door eased shut, a concerned look on his face.

'Have they treated you well? Do you require anything?'

'No, all we need is the confounded chief magistrate to appear so we

can get this straightened out. Damn fool bit of nonsense.'

Rudolf waved his hands about him with a flourish. 'Ask and you shall receive. I am his excellency's chief magistrate. You were arrested on my orders, but it's for your protection.'

'Balderdash. I'm quite capable of taking care of my granddaughter and myself.'

'Perhaps, but I can't take that chance. You see, I need to know what Susan overheard in that alleyway. My agents have been watching those two men, but we've never been able to get close. Susan is the only person in Worms who knows what they're planning.'

'I fail to see what that has to do with us. We're merely travellers passing through your town.'

'So you've said. Still, I am charged with keeping the peace in this town. Considering the circus going on out there, I need any information

that I can get to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.'

'Bloodshed?'

'Yes, Susan. This town is a riot waiting to happen and the guest of the castle could easily be the spark that sets off not only Worms but Europe.

Martin Luther has an impressive list of supporters, not only in the empire but in France and England also.'

Susan thought for a moment before continuing. 'If he has supporters,

he must have detractors.'

Rudolf smiled at her, a pleased look on his face. 'More than you'd think. Opposing the pope is a dangerous business. Most want him to be forced to recant. His death, especially under mysterious circumstances would give his supporters a rallying point. Others see him as a greater danger to Christendom than the Turks nibbling at Hungary.'

Susan looked at her grandfather, but he merely closed his eyes. Whatever decision she made, it was going to be hers and hers alone.

The silence in the room weighed on her as she met Rudolf's eyes and began to speak in a low voice.

'The two men who attacked me have been hired to kill Martin Luther. They mentioned a "shot through the heart" and then fleeing to Wurtzburg. From what I gathered, they were to meet their employer there to get paid. It seems he's a powerful man. They knew they'd be killed before they could come to trial if they were captured.'

Rudolf leaned on the table. 'Did they mention who their employer was?'

'No, they didn't mention his name. The taller of the men, Karl, seemed certain their employer would show up and pay them off. I don't know why he was so confident though. The other man, Wilhelm, was more nervous.

I'm sorry, that's all I know.'

'Don't be sorry, Susan. You've helped immensely.' Rudolf rose and

began to pace. 'A shot through the heart. Something doesn't sound right.

A gun's too large to sneak into the trial.'

Just as he was about to go on, there was an impatient knock at the

door. From the commotion outside, Susan knew something was wrong,

but Rudolf didn't seem too concerned. He motioned for her to remain

seated before casually opening the door. 'Why, Johann, what a surprise.

Please come in. Paul, please go and fetch some wine for our

distinguished guest.'

'Don't you "Why, Johann" me, you scoundrel. You knew I was out

here just as I knew you'd be here.'

'I'm glad to see you too, Johann. Please take a seat. I was just

conversing with some new friends.'

The older man scowled at the Doctor and Susan. She noted the

wispy, grey hair coming out from beneath his cap and the large nose that

dominated his face, but there was little about him that spoke of

friendliness or compassion. The newcomer dismissed them with a glance

and turned to Rudolf. 'I would like to know if you have an answer for me

yet?'

'Really, Johann, you must be patient. I am the chief magistrate, but I

do not own the man. If he does not wish to meet with you before the

trial,

he's within his rights.'

'The man publicly set fire to the papal bull threatening his

excommunication. I'm giving him a chance to come to his senses before I

have to destroy him in front of the emperor.'

'It is not your place to raise me up nor to destroy me, Johann Eck,'

came a soft voice from the door. 'The Lord has led me to this junction. I

will see it through to its natural conclusion.'

Susan watched Martin Luther carefully. He was not the most

handsome man she'd ever encountered, but there was something about

him that demanded attention. The entire tenor in the room changed when

he entered. Even Eck's bluster diminished somewhat. Given the man's

effect on people, Susan could see why someone wanted him silenced

before he could speak in court.

'It has to end, Martin. You'll be lucky to escape the fire as it is.'

'If that is God's will, then so be it, Johann. I will not stop speaking the

truth as it is revealed to me.'

'Revealed to you? Why should this great truth be revealed to you and

not to others who serve the church?'

'Perhaps because I serve God and not the church. Perhaps they

disregard the truth because they enjoy the church's power.'

'Heresy!'

Eck was so angry Susan worried he might actually strike Luther.

Rudolf must have shared her concern because he stepped between the two men. 'Johann, you're becoming an unwelcome house guest.'

'Don't be too proud of your position, chief magistrate. There may be many changes in the future. Standing with that one may not be in your best long-term interests.'

'I'll let the duke worry about my long-term interests. Should the pope wish to speak to me, he knows where to find me. Now, if you have nothing further to add, I suggest you withdraw.'

As she watched the interplay among the three men, Susan realised this was not the first time they'd had this discussion. Eck's dislike for Luther warred with a grudging respect for a worthy opponent. Luther seemed resigned to Eck's disdain and ignored the barbs shoved at him.

'Excuse me, but as a stranger here, I am unfamiliar with the source of all this animosity. Would one of you learned gentlemen care to explain this unseemly disturbance?'

Susan turned in her grandfather's direction, noticing he'd risen to his feet with his hands on his tunic. *I should have known he wouldn't keep quiet forever.*

Rudolf gave the Doctor a pained look and Eck seemed shocked that someone would address him so familiarly. Luther just smiled, almost as if he recognised what her grandfather was doing. 'My colleague Johann and I have a fundamental disagreement in what we believe the

church's
mission to be. He has the pope on his side. I believe I have the

advantage of God on mine.'
Eck's face turned red as he listened to Luther speak. ‘ *Pfeah!* Martin, why do you continue to speak defiance? The pope requests you keep your opinions to yourself lest you lead others astray.'
The Doctor turned to Eck with a puzzled look on his face. 'You believe what you speak is the truth?'
‘I do.'
'Then why do you fear this man? If you speak the truth and he speaks lies, will it not become obvious? You should be eager for him to speak and expose his statements to the court of public opinion.'
'You obviously have not paid attention to the scriptures. The Lord himself noted that Satan can quote the Bible when it suits him. No, it's better this way. Luther would lead the weak and easily confused into eternal damnation.'
'Is that so? Well, being a man of science and one who travels in my line of work, I find it better to observe two theories and conduct tests when looking for the truth.'
Susan shook her head, watching the two of them. Eck was warming up to the discussion and her grandfather loved a good debate.
'Perhaps that works in the realm of the flesh, but we are talking about the realm of the spirit. The pope is the anointed leader of the Holy

Catholic Church and derives his authority from those who came before him all the way back to Saint Peter.'

'Ah, yes, Peter. Very interesting man. A powerful speaker.'

Eck stared at the Doctor. 'You speak as if you'd met him yourself!'

Susan started to intercede, but the Doctor clearly realised his mistake and covered it up with a laugh. 'I'm not quite that old, good sir. I merely meant, I've studied his writings and deduced a great deal from them.'

Eck looked at the Doctor as though unsure how to deal with him.

Rudolf, Susan noted, took immediate advantage of the older man's pause and took Eck by the elbow. 'Intriguing as this is, Johann, I think we should end our discussions for this evening.'

Subtle, Susan thought, amused, as Rudolf led Eck towards the door.

'Thank you for stopping by. We'll see you at the Diet.'

Eck shook his arm loose from Rudolf's grasp, but continued walking.

When he'd exited, Rudolf spun around and glared at the Doctor. 'You play a dangerous game, Doctor. Johann Eck intends to become one of the pope's grand inquisitors. If he obtains this goal, you would not want him as an enemy.'

'I doubt I'll be within our friend's reach by then but I thank you for the warning just the same. Now, since you have Susan's information, I believe we should take our leave.'

Rudolf shook his head. 'I must disagree with you, Doctor. Susan's attackers will be looking for her. They can't take a chance on her

pointing

them out. You'll be my guests, at least for tonight.'

'Your prisoners, you mean?'

Rudolf shrugged. 'Consider this an unexpected delay in your travels if

you like, Doctor. But understand, the rooms here are a sight more comfortable than the castle's dungeon.'

Dungeon? Susan looked at the Doctor with alarm. *Please, Grandfather, don't be stubborn!*

The Doctor stared at Rudolf, but fortunately the younger man was almost as strong-willed. After a bit of posturing, he turned to Susan.

'What do you think of this generous offer, child?'

Susan caught the amused look on Luther's face, but was too relieved to care. 'I think I'd enjoy the castle much more than the cells beneath it.'

The Doctor spread his hands and turned to Rudolf. 'That settles it, I suppose.'

'Excellent. Martin, I have some duties to attend to. Would you kindly show my guests to the rooms across the hall from yours?'

'Of course. I would love the opportunity to get to know the Doctor and his — ?'

'Granddaughter, sir. My name is Susan.'

'A lovely name. You're not from the empire are you?'

Susan stopped, flummoxed, then followed her grandfather's lead. ‘No,

my grandfather is a merchant. We travel extensively.'

Luther bowed and extended an arm towards the door. Susan wondered what he was doing, then scampered ahead of him when she realised he was waiting for her. The Doctor rounded the table with a dignified air and walked next to Luther as they made their way down the castle hall.

Shaking his head as they went along, Luther said, ‘So many strangers in Worms lately! I cannot believe how many came to see two old men arguing doctrine and philosophy. No matter. My part will be short, I think, and the Diet's discussions will soon lose their appeal.'

'With all due respect, sir, I think you underestimate this event.' Susan hadn't intended to speak aloud and clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

Luther favored her with a small smile. 'Perhaps I do. So, tell me, what would bring someone from beyond the area to Worms?'

Susan saw her grandfather scowling at her. He had lectured her against getting involved countless times. *Not that he ever takes his own advice.* Still, the die was cast. She had to say something. 'From what I saw back there, you and Mr Eck are both eloquent speakers who command respect and attention when you discuss philosophy. I believe listening to the two of you debate will be entertaining as well as informative.'

That got Luther to smile and blush in pleased embarrassment. She

could see why so many people would be attracted to this man and his philosophy of life and religion. Behind him, her grandfather nodded his approval of her words.

'I suppose it is true that Johann and I have a bit of a reputation. Rudolf's correct, he's vying to be the pope's new inquisitor, and I suspect he means to use this trial to further his ambitions. I, on the other hand,

am merely a priest who doesn't agree with the head of the church.'

Oh, you're good, Martin Luther. I can see why you'll become the symbol for the Reformation in Europe. You're a leader, no matter that you don't think you are.

The Doctor stepped forward, drawing Luther's attention. 'I must agree with Susan, sir. You underestimate the power of your speech. Unfortunately, your enemies do not, which is what concerns me. The ruffians who accosted my granddaughter seem quite desperate to ensure your message never reaches the masses.'

'A regrettable incident. I greatly apologise.'

'Har-rumph, there's nothing for you to apologise for, sir. You couldn't have known of or prevented the incident. Still, we're faced with the question, what are you going to do?'

'Do? Why, attend the Diet as I have been commanded. The only other alternative is flight, which would be tantamount to admitting I was afraid

to debate with Eck. That, my good man, is not going to happen.'

Susan watched her grandfather fumble for his lapels, before grabbing

a handful of tunic instead. Clearing his throat again, the Doctor stared up

at the ceiling and then turned back to Luther. ‘No, you're quite correct

there, sir. You must attend the Diet.'

'Please, enough with the sirs. Call me Martin, please.'

'Martin, yes. The question becomes how do we get you to the Diet

without exposing you to unnecessary danger. We need to find some way

to get you there in secret.'

'But they'll be watching the castle, Grandfather,' Susan pointed out.

'They have to attack before he reaches the Diet. After will be too late.'

Timm, yes. Susan brings up an excellent point. The route between

the castle and the Diet is the most likely time of attack. They seem to

fear their employer more than being caught, so the discovery of their plot

shouldn't deter them.'

Luther frowned as he listened to the Doctor and Susan's debate.

'They sound like desperate men. Perhaps we should ask Rudolf. He

should have some ideas.'

'Perhaps you should ask Rudolf about what?'

Susan spun round to see the chief magistrate coming up the hall

towards them. 'We were discussing how to get Martin safely to the Diet

tomorrow. We believe the men from the alley may try again.'

'You may have a point there. Perhaps...' Rudolf paused, lifting a hand to his chin. 'There may be another way.'

The Doctor cleared his throat to gain Rudolf's attention. 'Perhaps we should adjourn to Martin's room. The ruffians' employer may have spies within these walls.'

Rudolf looked around, his eyes widening. 'I hadn't considered that. I confess, I am more comfortable with the law than dealing with conspiracies.'

Susan was surprised at how simply furnished Martin's room was. She had assumed a person of his standing would have a much more ornate

room. Martin moved over to the small table and motioned for everyone to sit down. Rudolf and her grandfather took their seats, intent on getting on with the matter, but Susan was more interested in wandering around. Besides, when older men discussed *important things*, a young woman's opinion wasn't always appreciated.

Walking over to a window, she leaned out and looked over the town. Worms was beginning to wind down as the sun began its western descent. She was watching a group of children being herded along by a harried mother when a sudden furtive movement caught her eye. Staring into the fading light, she saw Wilhelm staring up at the castle from an

alleyway.

'Grandfather, come quick. He's there.'

Chairs rustled behind her as the men rose. 'Who's there, child?' 'One of the men who attacked me is there in that alley.'

Rudolf and her grandfather rushed towards her. When she turned back, the alley was empty. 'He's gone now. But he was there.'

Rudolf looked out of the window. 'I don't see anything. Perhaps you only thought you saw one of them. You've had an awful scare today. Your imagination may be playing tricks.'

Ignoring Rudolf, Susan appealed to her grandfather. 'He was there. I'm not imagining things. I'm really frightened now.'

'I believe you Susan, but he's gone now. Come, join us. This discussion affects you.'

Susan allowed herself to be led to the table but her unease didn't diminish. She kept expecting Wilhelm to appear in the window any second, even though they were high above the street.

Her grandfather held a chair for her, then resumed his seat. 'What is your idea, Rudolf?'

'There's an old tunnel beneath this castle that leads to the Diet. It was built centuries ago as an escape tunnel, but the town grew and now the exit comes up inside the city. It's fallen into disuse; I doubt many know of its existence. Martin should be able to reach the Diet in relative safety.'

The Doctor turned to face Rudolf. 'Interesting. Have you been in this

tunnel lately? I would hate to find it caved in, or worse, threatening to cave in on us.'

'Guards are posted to make sure no one tries to slip in. They conduct periodic inspections of the tunnel.'

'A reasonable precaution, especially considering your current guest.'

Luther smiled at the comment. 'Your attention is greatly appreciated.'

Rudolf frowned. 'If these men are as desperate as you believe, they will be forced to act before the Diet begins. I will send the majority of my men ahead to search the building.'

'If the way is as secluded as you say,' Luther said, 'we should be safe enough. Will you be accompanying us?'

'Yes. You're my main priority now.'

'Well, that seems to settle things.' Susan noted with surprise that her grandfather was in an agreeable mood. 'I recommend we have dinner

then go to bed early. Tomorrow promises to be quite an interesting day. We'll have to trust that Rudolf's plan works.'

'No, Doctor. The plans of man are insignificant. I will make it to the Diet if it is God's will.'

'True, Martin, but God helps those who help themselves. Good night.'

Susan frowned as they left Martin's room and entered their own.

'Grandfather, something has been bothering me ever since this meeting

started.'

'What is it, child?'

'It may be nothing, but seeing Wilhelm outside the castle reminded me of several strange things that have happened since we've arrived. Like why were those two men discussing their plans where they could be overheard?'

'Men discuss things in alleyways with amazing frequency, Susan.'

'True. However, these men discovered my presence and attacked me, only to be driven off by a stranger who happened to observe the scuffle. Further, this person is the chief magistrate — the one charged with Martin Luther's protection.'

'Ha-a-rumph. A possible, though remarkable, coincidence.'

Susan paced around the small table, continuing to think aloud. 'Then, this same man takes us into protective custody where we meet Martin Luther himself.'

'It does seem a bit strange when you say it like that, child. But still, Rudolf is charged with keeping the peace.'

'Yes. However, because I've overheard the plot against Luther, we're suddenly instrumental in forming a counter-plot to sneak Luther through a long-forgotten passageway. Wilhelm was also spotted near the castle this evening. I find this an amazing string of coincidences.'

A sly smile spread across her grandfather's face. 'I knew once you recovered from your fright, you'd realise this was all orchestrated.'

Susan felt a mixture of relief and exasperation as she realised her grandfather was one step ahead of her. 'How long have you known?'

The Doctor's smile faded just a bit. 'Known? I still don't "know". If I had "known", I'd never have stepped foot inside this stone prison. I've been suspicious ever since Rudolf wouldn't leave us alone at the ale house. Things began to fall into place when the problem of how to get Luther to his trial came up.'

Susan shivered. 'What do you think is going to happen?'

'I don't know, but if something is going to happen, what better place than a forgotten passageway?'

'But, why us? We'd just arrived in town.'

'That, child, is probably the only coincidence in the entire situation. I believe the men who attacked you were waiting for an opportunity. You were the first person who came close enough to hear them. They probably knew you were there the entire time.'

'There's a cheery thought. Is there anything we can do?'

The Doctor winced a bit as he eased into a chair. Susan hadn't seen

him look this defeated in years. 'I'm not sure what we can do. It's been years since I've wielded a weapon, Susan, and I haven't trained you in any of the martial arts. Besides, Martin trusts Rudolf, and I have no solid evidence to convince him he shouldn't. If we could reach the Ship I'm certain we could come up with something, but I doubt the palace

guards

would let us leave.'

As the Doctor sat there, staring off into space, Susan found herself

drawn to the window. Looking down, she saw servants wandering in and

out while the guards paid them scant notice. As she watched, it struck

her how many of the servants were girls were about her age...

A mischievous smile formed on her lips. 'I know a way out,

Grandfather, but I'm the one who's going to have to do it.'

'Absolutely not! You've had your share of adventures for the day.'

'Grandfather, I'm the only one who can do this. Besides, if I've read

Rudolf right, he doesn't see me as a threat. I'm only a little girl.'

The Doctor looked at her with a mixture of pride and dread. She kept

her eyes locked on him until he turned away with one of his patented

throat clearings. Aha-a-rumph. Well, yes, that would be in keeping with

the time. I don't like it, but our options are limited. What's your plan?'

'I know one thing that will ensure Martin gets to the trial tomorrow. Do

you have that rough map that Rudolf drew showing the passageway?'

Susan wiped her hand over her eyes and groaned as sunlight poured

in the window. *I swear I just went to sleep. It can't be morning already.*

Her bare feet hitting the cold stone floor jolted her awake and cleared

some of the cobwebs. After dressing, she poured some water into the

small basin sitting on the dresser and splashed some on her face. *If I*

wasn't awake before, I am now. Doesn't anyone believe in heating?

Glancing around the room, she wondered where her grandfather had gone. *I hope my absence at dinner didn't cause too much trouble. It took longer than I thought it would. Hopefully my trip out last night wasn't for nothing.*

Getting out of the castle last night hasn't been as easy as she planned, and getting back in had been even harder. Still, if everything went right, it would be worth the missed meal and lost sleep.

Bolstered, Susan stepped out into the hall, barely stifling a screech when a young man, no more than fourteen, leapt to attention. He blushed and stammered out a speech he'd obviously been preparing.

'Good morning, Lady Susan. I'm here to direct you to your party. If you'll please accompany me?'

Seeing how official the young man was trying to act, Susan suppressed a giggle. 'I would be honoured by your company. What's your name?'

The young man's blush crept ever nearer to his blond hair. 'Eric, my lady.'

'Please, my grandfather is a merchant. Just call me Susan.'

'As you wish, my la... Susan.' He paused, then continued shyly. 'Lord

Rudolf and the others are dining in the small hall. He prefers it to the main dining room.'

Susan warmed up to the young man. 'Really? I'll bet you know

everything that goes on in the castle.'

Eric grinned. 'Not everything, but I do see a lot. People only notice me when they need something or I'm in trouble.'

Susan thought for a moment then made a decision. 'Eric, I need you to do me a favour.'

The young man stared at Susan as if she was speaking a foreign language. 'Excuse me, my lady, you don't have to ask my permission. I am here to serve you.'

'What did I tell you about that "my lady" stuff?'

Eric retreated a few steps as if expecting to be struck. When Susan stood there smiling at him, he seemed to grow more confident and then returned to his original spot. 'I'm sorry, Susan. What would you like me to do?'

'Stay nearby. I left my cloak airing in the window. When we get ready to leave, could you bring it to me?'

'I'll fetch it now and have it ready for you.'

'No. No sense in you having to hold it all that time. If you could just get it for me when breakfast is over.'

Eric shrugged and guided Susan down a set of stairs to a heavy oak door. 'As you wish. Lord Rudolf is dining within with your grandfather. I'll be able to reach your room faster from the balcony, so I'll wait there.'

'That will be perfect, Eric. Thank you!'

Eric blushed again. 'You're welcome... Susan.'

The young man rushed off before Susan could speak to him again. She heard footsteps coming up behind her and saw Luther standing there, a smile fixed on his face. 'I believe you have an admirer, child.'

Now it was Susan's turn to blush. 'He's a nice boy. I hope you slept well.'

If Luther noticed her haste to change the subject, he hid it well. 'Indeed. I've just returned from the chapel and am properly inspired to face Johann at the Diet.'

Susan started to open the door and then paused, turning back around to face Luther. 'Why are you doing this, Martin? Isn't challenging the pope dangerous? People have faced the stake or worse for disagreeing with the church.'

'An interesting question.' Luther motioned to a small bench further down the hallway and the two sat down. 'You're one of the few people who've asked "why" instead of condemning me. Let me turn this around.

Why are you interested?'

Susan shrugged. 'Grandfather taught me to question anything I see or hear. He is more of a traveller than a merchant, so we encounter new people all the time. Many are not quite what they appear to be. I let people explain themselves, and then I match up the words with deeds.'

'My dear, if you were a boy, I'd nominate you for the university without

a thought. Still, you asked a good question and deserve a good

answer.'

Martin adjusted himself on the bench until he faced Susan. 'I've spent most of my life studying the Bible, attending classes or teaching. That said, I can't reconcile some of the church's current policies with what I believe the Bible teaches. His holiness isn't a bad person, but I think he and his predecessors have let tradition and expediency get in the way of God's plan.'

'But, you're standing against him practically on your own! Aren't you worried about your own safety?'

Luther smiled. 'Confidentially, I'm absolutely terrified. I have no desire to become a martyr or mount an armed insurrection against the papacy. I prefer to be the one who asks questions no one else will, though I admit this doesn't win me many friends, especially among those who are beholden to the pope.'

'But why you? Why not one of the great rulers or one of the principals of the church?'

'Because, my dear, I'm the one with the questions. I can't ask someone else to ask them for me. If you're asking why they don't seem to have the same convictions I do, that's a completely different question. I'm afraid you'd have to ask them yourself.'

'So, you're the leader of this movement by default.'

Luther laughed. 'Movement! A movement of one, perhaps.'

Susan blushed furiously, realizing her gaffe, but Luther seemed too amused by the comment to notice. She hurried into the next question. 'If you're willing to ask these questions, won't others?'

'Perhaps. I think that's what worries Johann so much. If he reaches his goal and becomes the new grand inquisitor, he'll have to deal with any messes I create. Still, if my words find fertile ground, I guess that does make me a leader of sorts.'

A door opened and Rudolf's frowning face appeared in the hallway. 'There you are! Would you be so kind to join us so we can get started?' Luther rose and extended a hand to assist Susan to her feet.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting, Rudolf, but I must say, this conversation has invigorated me as much as a meal. Thank you, Susan.'

Rudolf gave Susan a dirty look as he motioned them in and snapped out orders for the servants to bring more food. Susan glanced up to the balcony and waved. Eric waved back and scampered off. Turning around, she saw her grandfather approaching with a questioning look on his face.

'Good morning, Grandfather, sorry I'm late. Martin and I had a wonderful talk.' She knew by the look he gave her there would be a long discussion later, but for now it would wait.

Rudolf paced around the room as Susan and Martin devoured their meal. 'Have you forgotten Martin's life is at stake? Why were you

wasting

time like that?'

'My apologies, Rudolf. I unforgivably detained the young lady.'

'I don't mean to sound harsh, Martin, but this whole business has me

on edge. The sooner you're safely at the Diet, the happier I'll be.'

As servants cleared the table and Rudolf ensured everyone was

ready, a soft knock sounded. Rudolf rushed to the door and snatched it

open, nearly bowling Eric over in the process. 'You impudent child. What

are you doing there? I left strict instructions we were not to be disturbed.'

'My apologies, Lord Rudolf. Lady Susan asked me to deliver her

cloak.'

Susan rushed forward. 'That's correct, sir. I left this in my room and

Eric was kind enough to fetch it.' Eric paused long enough to drape the

cloak over her arm then rushed from the room.

Rudolf snorted ungraciously and motioned for everyone to follow him.

They walked in silence as Rudolf led them into an older section of the

castle. Entering what appeared to be a storeroom, they saw two guards

waiting next to an old wooden door.

Rudolf signaled the guards who unbarred and opened the door

revealing a dark tunnel. One of the guards produced a torch and lit it,

illuminating a narrow passage, with rough-hewn walls and stairs leading

down. Susan had a momentary feeling of claustrophobia and grabbed

her grandfather's arm for support.

'Looks like another interesting adventure, doesn't it, child?'

'I would settle for a nice quiet visit, Grandfather.'

'Perhaps our next trip. It might do us some good to spend a little time

in one place.'

Rudolf's voice rumbled up the stairway. 'Doctor, Susan, could you

please keep up? We're already behind schedule.'

'So sorry, my good man. Come along, Susan. We don't want to keep

them waiting.'

Susan made her way down the dim stairs until she reached a small

chamber. Judging from the dust, this room hadn't been used in years.

Not unexpectedly, the Doctor broke away from the group to examine the

room. Susan started to call him back, but Rudolf beat her to it. 'I'm afraid

we don't have time to critique the decor, Doctor. If we can just keep

moving, it shouldn't take too long to get there.'

Susan grimaced at the tension in Rudolf's voice. He was obviously

used to getting his way and definitely not accustomed to people like the

Doctor. She heard her grandfather clear his throat, and cut him off before

he could speak. 'Wonderful, Rudolf. All this dust is getting to me. The

quicker we get through here, the happier I'll be.'

'That's the spirit!' Rudolf's enthusiasm was obviously false, but at least a fight was avoided. Susan nudged her grandfather forward towards the exit on the other side of the room. The first guard went first with his torch while the second waited for everyone to proceed him before following.

As they walked on, the passageway ahead became narrower and the floor and walls became rougher. This section was obviously older than the castle above it. Small passageways led off into the distance and some led into small chambers just off the main passageway.

The Doctor paused and ran his hand along the wall. Lifting his hand to his face, he sniffed and then turned his head towards Susan. 'We're in some old catacombs, but they don't appear to have been used in centuries.'

'You are correct, Doctor,' said Rudolf. 'The first families that lived here dug these passages, but they fell into disuse and only a few know of them. I doubt anyone in the city knows these passages as well as I do.'

'Indeed? We are lucky to have such an accomplished guide then.'

'I said you'd reach your destination. There's another chamber ahead and the stairway up is just beyond. Gunther, Albert, go ahead and ensure the passage is clear.'

Albert handed his torch to Rudolf, then the pair drew their swords and

moved forward while the others congregated around Rudolf. Susan bit her lip as she thought and then piped up. 'I thought you said no one knew about this passageway.'

Rudolf turned, an annoyed look on his face. 'I said, I believe no one knows about this passage. This is not the time to be taking chances.'

Unconvinced, Susan waited with the others, wondering what was going on ahead. After what seemed an eternity, one of the guard's voices

echoed down the passageway. 'The way is clear, Lord Rudolf.'

'Perhaps I was being overly cautious, but no harm done. Let's go. Martin has a very important day ahead.'

Unconsciously picking up their pace when they saw Gunther's light, they soon reached the chamber. The only furnishings were a pile of old

barrels and an a rotted crate. Between them stairs led upward, curving into the distance.

'We've reached our destination, my friends.'

As Luther turned towards Rudolf with a confused look on his face, Susan caught a hint of movement just before the unmistakable sound of

crossbow fire rang out. Albert and Gunther pitched forward, with heavy

bolts sticking out of their backs.

In the flickering light, Susan spotted the two crossbowmen, one rising out of the rotted crate and the other stepping from behind the pile of barrels. 'Grandfather, it's the two men who attacked me in the

alleyway.'

Rudolf spoke up, a triumphant note in his voice. 'Why, yes they are,

Susan. Quite perceptive of you.'

Luther stared at the men pointing their crossbows at the group.

'Rudolf, I don't understand.'

'Martin, Martin, that's the problem. You're much too trusting. I think

Susan and the Doctor suspected something was wrong. They weren't

willing to let you come by yourself, though how they plan to protect you is

beyond me.'

The Doctor stepped forward towards Rudolf. 'You might be surprised,

chief magistrate.'

'Please, Doctor, don't try to bluff your way out.' Rudolf took a position

between the two snipers. 'Martin is about to meet a tragic fate. Johann

Eck, afraid he'd lose his case against Martin, which would cost him any

chance of becoming grand inquisitor, organised the ambush. I would

have never known Albert and Gunther were in his employ had not I found

this incriminating evidence on them.' He smiled as he pulled some

papers from his tunic and slapped them against his other hand.

Susan stepped in front of Martin. 'No one will believe such a wild tale!'

'My dear, I am the chief magistrate for Worms. I know more criminals

than you might imagine. Finding a forger was as easy as lacing my own

shoes. Your bodies will be discovered here and the assassins' bodies will

be discovered somewhere else.'

'Others know you came with us.'

'Unfortunate accidents do occur from time to time. I have something

special planned for your friend Eric.'

Susan brought her hand to her face as the Doctor spoke up, moving

to one side. Wilhelm's crossbow pivoted with him, keeping its quarrel

pointed directly at his chest. 'It appears you've thought of everything.'

'Grandfather, how can you say that?'

'It's obvious he's been planning this for quite some time.'

Rudolf's smile grew as he turned to the Doctor. 'You're taking this

very well, old man. Still, it's time to end this.'

A voice boomed out behind Rudolf from the curved stairwell, 'I agree.'

As Rudolf, Karl, and Wilhelm turned in alarm, a number of guards

dressed in the livery of the cardinal of Worms rushed down the stairs.

Karl and Wilhelm made a break for the passageway on the far side, only

to pull up short when several other guards appeared in the corridor

ahead. It wasn't long before Rudolf and his henchmen were restrained

and bound.

Luther rushed over and grabbed Eck by the shoulder. 'My thanks,

Johann. How did you ever ferret out this plot?'

'Don't think this changes anything, Martin. I'm still determined to crush

you in the Diet, but no interloper is going to deny me that pleasure.'

'Still, how did you know how to find us?'

'Thanks should be given to that young lady there. She crept out of the castle dressed as a servant, then made her way across town until she found me. Took her a bit to convince my secretary that she had to see me right then. She refused to give up until she told me about her suspicions. Had the sense to note where the passageway entered the Diet when Rudolf drew the map last evening, too.'

Luther turned astonished eyes on Susan. 'My dear, did I say if you were a boy I'd sponsor you into university? If you're interested, I'm willing to serve as your sponsor no matter what sex you are. You're an incredible child.'

Susan blushed and looked away. 'I was hoping that my fears were unfounded and that I was just a frightened girl. Also, I have no doubt your esteemed colleague would not be so free with his praise if I had been wrong.'

Luther, Eck, and her grandfather laughed at that comment, while Rudolf and his assassins were dragged to their feet. Eck walked in front

of Rudolf and stared at him. 'You wouldn't care to tell me who was behind all of this?'

'You must be joking.'

Johann sighed. 'I had hoped this would be easy. Take him to the inquisition chambers. There'll be plenty of time to get an answer after

the

trial is over.'

The guards hustled the struggling men out of the chamber and the

others followed at a more leisurely pace. Once they reached the main

floor of the Diet, Luther turned to Susan and the Doctor. 'I am afraid the

rest of the trial will be somewhat anticlimactic after that excitement, but

still, would you care to stay? I think having a friendly face or two in the

audience might be what I need right now.'

The Doctor cleared his throat and reached up to grab the thick tunic

near the neck. 'Ha-a-rumph. Well, I'm not certain we can...' He paused,

feeling a tugging on his sleeve and turned to face Susan.

'Grandfather, I would like to stay... if we have time.'

He paused for a moment and then nodded, a grin spreading across

his face. 'My dear Susan, in our line of work, we always have *time*.'

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God Send Me Well to Keep

Linnea Dodson

An adventure of the Fifth Doctor, with Nyssa

'I begin to think that God himself opposes your plan, Cromwell.' Henry

stared grumpily out of the mullioned window where a light snow was

falling over the palace grounds. 'Storms are not unusual, but ones that

keep my ships in harbour for over a fortnight smack of divine will.'

He pulled the velvet curtains abruptly shut, limping over to the large

stone fireplace. Chief Minister Cromwell solicitously pulled an ornately

carved wooden chair to the best place for Henry to stretch his aching leg

to the heat.

'This alliance has already taken months of negotiations, what are a

handful of extra days, Your Majesty? While it is a disappointment that

you cannot start the holidays with your new wife by your side, she will be

here soon enough. I dare say you will have met the Cleves princess

before the twelve days of Christmas are over.'

'Maybe she will have learned enough English to speak with you by

then.' The Duke of Norfolk stepped forward with two goblets of spiced

wine, offering one to Henry with a bow. Cromwell glared.

'She is taking lessons. She knows she has much to learn.'

'I could imagine.' Norfolk ignored Cromwell's outstretched hand, lifting

the other goblet he held to his own lips, swallowing once before he

continued. 'I hear her mother has taught her nothing but needlework. No

languages, no rhetoric. Not even music.' Another swallow while Cromwell

fumed. Tut I'm sure she can be taught enough not to be an

embarrassingly stupid consort to the most cultured king in Christendom.'

For a moment Norfolk wondered if Cromwell would burst into a furious

tirade right in front of the King, but the peasant was too wily to fall for

such an easy trick. Instead, he turned back to the King, fussing over him

like the lowly servant nature had intended him to be. 'Sire, your queen-to-

be is biddable and breedable, and she comes with an important political

alliance. These alone make her suitable for your station. As for God's

will? God wills you to continue as Defender of the Faith.' He looked right

at Norfolk over the King's head. 'Cleves will be your ally in defending it

against the pope and his Catholic corruptions.'

Norfolk swallowed wine the wrong way, and only great effort kept him

from coughing. So that was going to be Cromwell's tactic — to try to

discredit him in the King's many religious purges.

Henry, never oblivious to the currents below the surface, shifted

impatiently in his chair. 'Peace between you,' he said. It was an order.

'We will see Our two most trusted advisers council Us with peace to suit

this Christmas Eve.'

Norfolk bowed graciously, first to Henry, second to Cromwell, then

turned his back on him to address the King, pressing his advantage.

'Sire, Christmas is a season of gifts and miracles. If God truly wishes you

to avoid marriage to the Lady Anne, surely he will provide her alternative?' Henry was fond of wagers and a believer in omens. Would he take the bait? 'That's a point.' Henry smacked his hand flat upon the armrest, suddenly smiling. ‘So may it be, then! If I see another suitable bride before I meet Anne of Cleves, then I will know God's will.'

'There will still be the matter of the arrangements already made,' Cromwell said, sounding faintly flustered for the first time.

Henry casually waved the objection away, dropping from royal command to man-to-man talk. 'You have never failed me yet. I trust you to find me a way to dissolve any entanglements I find distasteful.' He laughed shortly.

'As you have already so ably done.'

'Yes,' Cromwell said smoothly. 'That is why you made me chief adviser.'

Norfolk ground his teeth, as he did every time he was reminded of how closely he'd lost that plum job and why. *You'll have your reward in hell for arranging those divorces! I should be chief adviser, not the son of an alehouse keeper!*

Henry shifted again, starting to rub his leg. 'Now, both of you leave me and send in my physician. We shall meet again at the feast tonight, and I shall see what God might provide — fair weather or fair maid.'

Cromwell and Norfolk bowed low and swept out, ignoring each other.

God shall provide fair maid, Norfolk promised himself silently as he

headed back to his house. *I guarantee it with the introduction of my niece tonight. And then God will provide me with what I want most — the downfall of that peasant, Cromwell!*

'You'll love summer in Floriana, Nyssa,' the Doctor said as she stepped out of the TARDIS. 'The gardens, the food, the beaches...'

'It's snowing.'

He stuck his head out the door to see flakes falling on thatched roofs in a city he could recognise in any time period. 'You'll love winter in London, Nyssa. The masques, the feasts...' She glared at him, but he only grinned back at her incorrigibly. 'Why don't you go to the wardrobe and put on something warm before we explore? You'll catch your death in that sundress.'

She didn't whine or argue. In that respect she was a lot quieter a companion than many, but Nyssa did have a rather complete line of imperial glares, and he was still getting Traken Evil Eye Number 27. He avoided it by checking the instruments. 'Let's see... it's 1539. Christmas Eve, too! Pity it's too early for crackers to have been invented, but maybe there's a frost fair, eh? Twelve days of Christmas in England, that'll be fun, won't it?'

'Twelve days of what?'

'Singing, dancing and feasting, mostly.'

'Would we stay the whole time?'

‘If you'd like.'

She shivered, but she also smiled. 'Let me put on a coat.'

There was no frost fair, a disappointment soon soothed by the multitudes of vendors preparing for the upcoming holiday. The Doctor taught Nyssa about Christmas traditions while they stuffed themselves to bursting on sweetmeats, then walked it off by looking through shop windows, listening to carols, and comparing decorations until they were hungry again. He'd followed his nose to a bakery, and came out to the awning where Nyssa was standing, bringing her mulled cider and gingerbread hot out of the oven.

'I think I like this,' Nyssa said between nibbles. 'Usually by now we've found hostile aliens or been captured as criminals or had to run for our lives at least once.'

'Oh come now, not always!'

'Just usually.' But she said it with a hint of a smile.

‘If you want a real treat, then we should go to one of the King's feasts. Always loved a good party, Harry did, particularly at holidays. He was quite the musician, and there was always lots of dancing.'

'This is where you tell me that you're good friends with this "Harry" and brag about how you've helped him, isn't it?'

‘Nyssa, that's unfair. I merely guide history, and I never brag.' 'Except

for...'

'All right, all right. You can rest assured, however, that I have never

met Henry VIII in all my lives.' A thought struck him. 'Would you like to go

to one of his dances? I've heard people talking, there's going to be one

this very night.'

'Doctor, they'll never let us in!'

He grinned. 'Never say never. They'll let us in if we ask politely.' ‘To a

royal party? Of one of the few people you haven't met?'

'The trick is, you don't really have to ask at all. I've been crashing

posh parties for eight hundred years, I know all the tricks. Wear

something fancy — the wardrobe will take care of you. Sweep in like you

own the place and make sure to refer to yourself as something

impressive like Lord Tempus and Lady Nyssa of Traken...'

'Of the Traken Union if you want to be accurate.'

He nodded acknowledgment. 'And the next thing you know, a

footman's announcing you to the crowd!'

Nyssa had to admit it, the Doctor was right, as usual. Except that the

man at the door must have misheard them, because what came out was

'Lord Tempest and Nyssa of Aachen.' She started to correct him when

the Doctor grabbed her wrist and towed her along. Trying not to stumble

over the bulky dress she felt she was drowning in, Nyssa had no choice

but to follow.

He pulled her into a gigantic, crowded room. It was stifling with the heat and smell of the people (who had not counted a good bath among their party preparations), the food, the fires and thousands of candles. Tables and chairs lined the walls, while in the cleared centre of the

stone floor there were groups dancing — not the limb-flailing Charleston that Tegan had shown her, but what Nyssa still thought of as proper dancing. Stately and complex. Homesickness cut suddenly deep enough to make her blink back tears. There had been grand balls when Traken was the heart of an interplanetary union, and she had been a popular partner. Overwhelmed, Nyssa hung back. 'Give me a moment,' she said to the Doctor, who nodded.

For a while she just stood there near the wall, watching the crowd and trying to figure out the dance steps. Not that anyone would ask, of course, but it was nice to know that she wouldn't trip over her own feet if, on the off-chance, someone noticed her. Naturally, the minute she tried to move she tripped over her heavy skirts instead. Nyssa all but fell onto a girl slightly younger than herself who was heading towards the dance floor.

Before Nyssa could even draw breath to apologise, much less get to her feet, she'd been painfully grabbed by the girl's escort, a middle-aged man in ermine-trimmed robes. 'Be more careful, wench!'

'It was an accident,' the Doctor said, glaring until the man let her go.

The girl was much more calm about it. 'Are you all right?' she asked, shaking her dress back into place.

'Yes. I'm so sorry, I — '

'Don't worry about it. Is it your first time at court too? It's my first royal event, I'm so excited!'

'We don't have time to dally,' the man snapped to the girl. 'You have a job to do, Katherine.'

She sighed. 'Yes, uncle.' With flat tones, as if she was reciting a particularly boring lesson, she added, 'I'm here to restore the family fortune and catch the eye of the King.' With a sudden bounce, she smiled at Nyssa, revealing dimples. 'But I'm going to dance and have fun too!'

The man growled, hauling her back into the crowd.

The Doctor stared distractedly after them. 'I wonder if that was... Never mind.' His attention snapped back to her. 'Are you all right? I'll understand if you want to leave.'

'No, not just ye-' Nyssa stopped in surprise. The altercation had caught the attention of a pack of young men. A particularly handsome one gestured in their direction and broke away from his peers to approach.

'Doctor! What do I do?'

He grinned at her. 'I suggest you dance.'

Then the young man bowed and held out his hand to her, and she couldn't resist. With a curtsy and a smile she let him lead her out onto the dance floor and decided to pretend for just one night that all was as it had been.

She wasn't as polished here as she had been at home, not when she had to watch the other dancers to know what to do properly while not tripping over her hem again. But she was having fun all the same; the

men of the court were fascinated with anyone new, so they were all bright and charming and a little bit flirtatious with her, and she was having the time of her life. Every now and then she could see the Doctor somewhere along the walls — easy to spot, as he hadn't bothered changing his clothes — and he'd always nod encouragingly as she swept by.

It had been the minor courtiers who had no one else to flatter or pay them attention who came to her, mostly. Every now and then a slightly older, better-dressed partner would pick her out of the swarm of very young men attempting to monopolise her, his conversation not endless praises of her beauty and grace, but more probing questions. Where was

she from? Who were her family? When had she arrived at court? Rusty

diplomatic skills learned as the daughter of a consul came back to her as

she answered with blended honesty and evasion. Eventually, they would

decide that she could do nothing for their careers and go away. But there

was always another one to take his place.

It had been a long time since Nyssa had had so much fun.

Norfolk danced once with his niece Katherine to make sure that

everyone in the room knew her status and patronage, then left her with

strict orders to behave herself. It galled him that his best path back to

supremacy was the empty-headed whelp of his useless brother, but she

was young and pretty. That alone would be enough to catch the eye of

Henry, who still thought he was the handsome, virile young king he'd

stopped being quite some time ago.

He would flatter Henry, then introduce him to Katherine. If the girl's

flirtatious ways weren't enough to tempt the King into calling off the

wedding — and it was probably far too late for that — then Henry may be

interested enough to order that she be appointed one of Anne's ladies-

in-waiting. Since Henry almost always picked his royal mistresses from

that exalted pool, it would be better anyway — which was why Cromwell

had been carefully making sure that no female kin of his had that post

for

years.

Katherine had a way of attracting attention, so when Norfolk

approached the King he wasn't surprised to watch Henry leaning forward

in his chair, gesturing out onto the floor. But when he bowed and turned,

he was appalled to find that while Henry was avidly watching the

dancers, it wasn't Katherine his eyes were following. It was that curly-

headed cat who had tried to shove Katherine off her feet!

'She has to be an impostor,' Cromwell was saying languidly, although

his sharp eyes were also watching the girl's every move. 'I know perfectly

well who is who in all the courts worth knowing about, and if Anne can't

come across the channel, no new German girl could have slipped into

London ahead of her. She claimed to be from Aachen? And have some

outlandish name — what was it, Nessa? Nyssa? Mark my words, she's

some plain Jane from Kent.'

'No matter,' Henry rumbled. 'There are always those who have taken

liberties with my hospitality at these entertainments. As long as they

behave themselves and stay below the salt, I can afford the charity.' He

smiled as she skipped by a few yards away. 'If they were all so pretty as

this intruder, I would hold a feast every day!'

'Only a wanton would have her hair unbound and uncovered,'

Cromwell pointed out.

Henry laughed rudely. 'All the better! I wonder what she would say if I

asked to dance with her. Try to raise her station by flattering me?

Apologise for the intrusion? Beg the royal favour for some relative or

friend?'

Norfolk started thinking rapidly. He knew the look on the King's face

— the bloated old goat was falling in love again, or at least falling in

fascination and that was just as useful. Cromwell's great mistake lay in

forgetting that Henry wanted to have grand romances with lots of flirting

and wooing. By asking the King to marry a woman he had never met or

spoken to, Cromwell had badly weakened his position, and Norfolk was

too experienced a soldier to not take advantage of this opportunity. While

he'd hoped to distract the King with Katherine, if Henry was going to go

for this girl instead then Norfolk would simply shift his plans and bring her

into his camp as well. Everyone could be controlled somehow, either with

promises or threats.

But first, he had to know if this infatuation would last past the first time

the chit opened her mouth. 'Why not dance with her and find out, sire?'

Norfolk asked quietly.

The strumpet twirled, her skirt showing a surprising amount of ankle.

Henry stood up and headed towards the dance floor.

Her feet were starting to get sore in these odd shoes, and it was becoming a little nerve-wracking to keep dodging questions about her home and family. Nyssa was just looking around for the Doctor to ask to leave when the crowd hushed and parted, the people around her going to their knees. Nyssa dropped into a distracted curtsey, still turning her head — only to be frozen by the voice that had snapped at her a few hours earlier.

'Your Majesty, forgive her. She's a simple child, and easily overwhelmed, which is why she seems to have forgotten the appropriate reverence due a king.'

Gulping, Nyssa went lower, her burning face turned to the floor. *Move along, you aren't interested in me, move along...*

Fingers gripped her chin with surprising gentleness, making her lift her head up. A huge man was looming over her, his massive form padded out still further with velvets, furs, and bulky jewels.

'I heard there was a pretty novelty among the ladies tonight,' he rumbled at her, smiling. 'The rumours didn't do you justice.' He chucked her under the chin and Nyssa tried not to flinch. 'Rise. Dance with me.'

The people around her gasped and she swallowed hard.

'I'm not a very good dancer,' she said hopefully as he lifted her back

up.

'And I am lame. We shall manage.' He was still smiling, but she could see the faintest hint of displeasure in his eyes. After all the times she had chided the Doctor for offending one leader or another, Nyssa knew she'd never hear the end of it if she was the one who made them run for their lives tonight. So she dipped into another proper curtsey and let him take her hand.

Two faces stood out of the crowd gaping at them. Katherine, the girl she'd seen earlier, looked furious. The Doctor looked horrified.

The music started up again, a slow tune that let her partner lead her in intricate figures without asking him to put too much weight on a leg that seemed to pain him. After the usual questions about her name and background, there didn't seem to be much to say. Flailing for a conversational gambit that would flatter without raising too many questions about herself, Nyssa finally said, 'I like this music. I've never heard this tune before.'

It was the right thing to say. He beamed at her, patting her hand. 'It is my own composition.'

'It's beautiful!'

'Are you musical?'

'Not really. My education was in different areas.'

This seemed to surprise him. 'You are educated? You can read?' 'Of course!'

'How about languages?' He guided her through a turn, staring at her intently. 'Can you understand what I'm saying?'

'Yes.'

He thought about that for a moment, then asked, 'How about now?'

Nyssa stopped herself from laughing just in time. 'I can still understand you.'

'How many languages do you speak?'

The answer was 'just one', but it would take too long to explain about the TARDIS's ability to allow its occupants to understand all languages.

So Nyssa went for a more vague version of honesty. 'As many as my friend the Doctor needs me to.'

'A doctor? No wonder you are so well educated if you are the ward of a learned man.' He pulled her a little closer and asked the question she'd been dreading. 'Tell me more about yourself.'

It had been rather a dampener on the Doctor's party mood to realise that the two men he'd most wanted to meet in Henry's court — Erasmus and Thomas More — were dead. So were Henry's first three wives, not to mention uncounted religious dissenters. Popular King Harry was

well

along his route to becoming the despotic Henry VIII remembered by

history, and there was nothing the Doctor could do about it. Pity they

hadn't arrived about twenty years earlier. Well, that was the TARDIS for

you.

On the other hand, Nyssa was having so much fun that he hated to

make her leave. She was obviously enjoying the attention, and he had to

admit that it wasn't as often as he'd like that either of them could just

relax and enjoy themselves. What could be the harm?

He almost inhaled his drink when he saw Nyssa's latest dancing

partner. He was about to try to get her away when the man they met

earlier appeared at his side. 'I am the Duke of Norfolk,' he whispered

warningly in the Doctor's ear. 'If you value your life and that of the girl,

you will do exactly as I say.'

The Doctor sighed. Why did this sort of thing always happen to him?

'What do you want?' he asked bluntly.

'If the King is uninterested in that brat, nothing. You will leave this hall,

return to whatever backwater you came from, and never more come to

the court.

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure. Shall I take Nyssa and

leave now?'

Norfolk ignored him. 'But if, as I think, the King becomes interested in her, then you will say that she is tired and the two of you will accompany me to my home, where I shall tell him you are staying as guests of my niece.'

'Let me guess. If I don't, horrible things will happen to both of us. How predictable.'

Norfolk smiled coldly. 'Never let it be said that I am unmerciful. Horrible things only need happen to one of you.'

'What's to keep me from leaving anyway?'

A knife flashed into Norfolk's hand. As he started nonchalantly using it to clean under his fingernails, he asked conversationally, 'The large men just outside the door wearing my livery, perhaps?'

Out on the dance floor, Henry was grinning broadly, tugging on Nyssa's curls. She forced a smile back. Norfolk grunted. The Doctor sighed again.

As the music ended, Henry guided Nyssa back to them. The knife vanished as quickly as it had been drawn. 'Norfolk, I like this lady right well!' the King boomed. The crowd around them applauded politely and went into a great whispering gale of gossip.

'I'm so very glad my ward has pleased Your Majesty,' the Doctor said firmly, stepping forward to take Nyssa's hand.

'You must be the Doctor,' Henry enthused. 'Tell me, are you a Doctor of physic or philosophy?'

'Philosophy, mostly,' the Doctor said, pulling Nyssa to his side and putting an arm around her. 'It's been a wonderful evening, hasn't it, Nyssa? Something to tell your fiancé when you see him again.'

'My...' she began confusedly, but she got the message when he squeezed her shoulder. 'Yes! My fiancé! Dear... Adric.'

'A marriage contract?' the King pouted at her. 'You did not mention you were taken.'

Unbothered, Norfolk flicked a drop of candle wax off the fur of his sleeve. 'No matter, Your Majesty.' He stared calmly at the Doctor. 'We all

know that all sorts of things can be... broken... if it is your royal will. As it is, the hour is late and the child must be tired. With your leave, I shall escort her and her guardian home.'

'Does that mean I have to leave too?' Katherine, who had worked her way through the crowd asked plaintively. The Doctor took note of the appreciative look that Henry gave her, and was relieved. Maybe history could be shifted back on track with only a little nudge from him. Before Norfolk could answer the Doctor suggested, 'There's no reason for the young lady to have her party cut short. Especially since she is such a lovely dancer.'

Katherine giggled, dimpling a bit as she dropped into a low curtsey.

Henry grinned back at her, but when he moved to take her hand, he almost stumbled on his bad leg. 'Perhaps the young lady would be happier to keep me company as I watch.'

'She would enjoy nothing more,' Norfolk said with the slightest warning note. Katherine pouted at him behind the King's back, but took the royal arm and slowly accompanied him back.

'Well done,' Norfolk murmured to the Doctor. 'I thank you for that.'

'That's that, then?' the Doctor said, rubbing his hands together. 'Katherine has her introduction to the King. That's what you wanted, isn't it? They make a lovely couple. Congratulations. We'll be going now.'

But Norfolk caught his arm as he tried to usher Nyssa away. 'I really must insist that you enjoy my hospitality for a few days longer. Until we know which way the King's favour will finally fall.'

'Your hospitality?' Nyssa asked.

'Er. Yes, the Duke of Norfolk has graciously offered to give us a place to stay during the holiday. Isn't that wonderful?' He squeezed her shoulder again. 'I really think we ought to accept.'

Oh dear. She was giving him Traken Evil Eye Number i4 this time. And there really were several extremely large men with swords right outside the door.

Nyssa had to admit, it was one of the more comfortable jails they'd

ended up in. The duke had brought them to a huge house, all white and

timbered, and ordered the servants to give them everything they needed.

Unfortunately, he'd also immediately split them up. She hoped the Doctor

was all right. She was fine, if you discounted the fact that she was locked

in. There weren't any vents to crawl through, the blazing fire precluded

an escape up the chimney, the key wasn't there to be poked out of the

lock, and a glance out of the window showed that the walls were too

smooth to climb down and too high to make a rope, even if she used all

the sheets and the curtains from the four-poster bed. About the only

other implements she could find were the loose chemise they gave her to

sleep in, a couple of candlesticks, a prayer book of some sort, and a

chamber pot. She stuck the last back under the bed with a shudder.

It seemed the only practical thing to do would be to get some sleep.

A few hours later, the sound of the lock clicking interrupted her doze.

The candles had gone out and the fire was down to its embers, so all she

could see was a blurred figure moving towards the bed.

'Doctor?'

The answer was a quick jerk at the bedding, and the next thing Nyssa

knew, she'd been hit in the face with a pillow.

'You cat!' Katherine snapped, jumping on the bed and continuing to swing the pillow as hard as she could at Nyssa, who tried to squirm away. 'How dare you go flirting with my king?'

'Your king?' Nyssa finally managed to get a grip on the pillow and yank it away. 'You can have him! I just want to leave!'

'Really?' Katherine plopped down next to her, instantly friendly. 'I can't say I want him either. He's old and fat! I'd rather bed a suckling pig! But my uncle says I have to catch his eye so I can be queen and then I'll have jewels and gowns and can give titles to all my friends.' She bounced a bit on the bed. 'Did you see Thomas? The King's servant? Oh, he's even more handsome than my Francis! I'd put up with that fat old goat if I could look at him every day!'

'I don't think you should talk that way about the King in front of your uncle,' Nyssa said, sliding out from under the covers. The door was still open; if she could slip out and find the Doctor...

Katherine snorted. 'He's such a baited bear! "Do this! Don't do that!" As if I'd be as stupid as my cousin was! I wouldn't mess with religion and things. And I wouldn't have to worry about if I bore a boy or not, because the King must be beyond such things by now. He's so ancient! And anyway, there's Prince Edward already.'

‘Mmm-hmm,' Nyssa mumbled to this spate of nonsense, heading out into the black hall. They had brought her ten paces past two doors,

and

then there should be stairs to her left... A candle flared in the darkness

just a couple of feet away.

It was Norfolk, wrapped hastily in a cloak over what looked like a

nightshirt and carrying a candlestick. 'Don't be so quick to fly, my pretty

wren. Night airs are not good for little birds.'

'Where's the Doctor?' Nyssa asked harshly.

Norfolk jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'Locked in a room of his

own near the rest of the men. Try to leave again, and he'll spend the rest

of the twelve days in a dungeon in the Tower. Now go back to bed like a

good girl and we'll make sure that you get to attend the King's Christmas

feast tomorrow evening.'

'I still don't understand why you want me,' Nyssa protested as he

pushed her back into the room.

'You don't need to. You just need to know that bad things will happen

if you don't do what I say. Katherine!' he barked into the room. 'See to

your new friend and try to get enough sleep that you don't look like a hag

tomorrow.' He slammed the door and the lock clicked shut.

Katherine sighed in the darkness behind her. 'I hope you don't snore.'

The first time the Doctor got to see Nyssa was when she arrived with

Katherine for Christmas mass; food and clothing had been brought to his

room, which had otherwise stayed locked until Norfolk ordered him to

church. Terribly inconvenient, that. He really was going to have to rebuild

the sonic screwdriver one of these days.

Nyssa had also been dressed in the local clothing, in an elaborate

gown with many petticoats and much lace. It looked rather nice on her,

but she was walking very slowly and unsurely, holding herself in an oddly

rigid manner and breathing shallowly.

The Doctor was beside her in two long strides, almost shoving

Katherine out of the way.

'Are you all right?' the Doctor asked quietly, looking her over. He

couldn't see any injuries, but if anyone had hurt her...

'They — made — me — wear... under — the — dress... laced —

tight... can't — *breathe!* ' she panted back.

'You'll be all right,' the Doctor said absently, his mind ticking over at

top speed. The plan, such as it was, had been to grab Nyssa and bolt the

first moment they saw each other and had an opening. Sticking around

would only allow the hole in the web of time to widen a bit more.

Unfortunately, the women's clothing of this time was a better shackle

than even a ball and chain — if Nyssa could barely walk in all the skirts,

heels and corsetry, then she wouldn't be able to run at all. And in the

time it would take them to get enough of that nonsense off her so that she could run, they would be caught.

Time for a new plan. She was gazing up at him quietly, which meant that she didn't have any ideas either and was trusting him to save them.

He absently patted her hand. 'Play along until we find an opening, and take every chance you get to make Katherine look good.'

'She calls Henry her king.'

'He's going to marry her in a few more months, but he doesn't know that yet. This is a critical temporal nexus. We don't dare change anything! Do whatever you must to make the King focus on her.'

A familiar set of large men marched forward, bracketing the women.

'For the safety of the ladies,' Norfolk said smoothly, baring his teeth at the Doctor.

After the mass, Nyssa was swept away with the rest of the women of the household, off to family celebrations. Katherine had hold of one of her arms and looked like she was talking her ear off as well. The Doctor moved to follow them, but Norfolk stopped him with a hand on his arm.

'Come to my study,' he said.

Once they were in, and the heavy door shut, Norfolk turned, gesturing to a padded chair. The Doctor sat gingerly, as Norfolk settled heavily into another by the fire. 'Invitations have come from the palace,' he said.

'Myself and my lady wife were already to attend the King's Christmas

feast this evening. Now he wishes both my Katherine and your Nyssa to

grace one of the lower tables. I have naturally accepted.'

'Send Katherine alone. Tell him Nyssa is ill. You can't possibly want

the competition anyway.'

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Norfolk stared into the fire, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. 'Tempting,

but it is never good to deprive the King of whatever he wants whenever

he wants it.' He glanced back, looking at the Doctor appraisingly. 'Many

men would be thanking God for the honour of the royal favour.'

'I prefer a quiet life.'

Norfolk snorted.

'Look, we are not your enemies,' the Doctor said cautiously.

'No, you are my pawns,' Norfolk replied bluntly.

'I can be your ally.' The Doctor crossed the fingers of one hand

behind his back. 'I can make sure you get everything you want.'

Norfolk snorted again, with no trace of humour this time. 'Do you

know the Christmas boon I have prayed God to grant for the last eight

years?' The Doctor shook his head, although he had a shrewd guess.

'Cromwell's head on a pike!' Norfolk jumped up, pacing agitatedly. 'It is

against the natural order that a peasant should counsel a king. And look

at what that devil in human form advises him to do! Set aside his lawful

wife, the faithful Catherine. Bring turmoil to the faithful, leaving me to

protect the King against the uprisings. Rob God himself!'

'It's terrible,' the Doctor said vaguely, rummaging through his memory

for the details. 'Oh, of course! The monasteries. Cromwell talked the King

into breaking up all the monasteries and taking their money for the

treasury.'

'The monasteries, the churches, the shrines...' Norfolk crashed back

into the chair, staring emptily at fire, suddenly looking smaller and

sadder. 'Twenty-one carts. That's how many it took to haul away the

shrine of Sainted Thomas in Canterbury as if it was nothing more than

pigs for market.'

'Such a waste of a thing of beauty,' the Doctor said, and this time he

wasn't faking his anger. The destruction of art always infuriated him. 'And

after it had stood for what — three centuries? More?'

'Kings took pilgrimage to see it. Henry's own father left tribute there,

and that filth, that fiend, talks him into melting it down!' Norfolk spat.

'He is leading my king and my country into hell with him, and finally

God has granted me the means to stop him. I will destroy Cromwell and I

don't care who goes down to make sure it happens!'

'I can help you,' the Doctor said. 'I can make sure that Henry gets a

terrible first impression of Anne. He'll be so furious that he'll practically

run to Katherine. But you have to let us go.'

That was definitely a snort of laughter. 'Pretty words, but why should I

trust you? No, your ward stays here as long as I need her, and you stay

until I'm sure that you won't run to Cromwell. I've said too much to you

already.'

The Doctor drew himself up. He hated to do this sort of thing, but

sometimes appeals to superstition were the fastest way to get what he

needed. 'I am a doctor of alchemy. You can trust me because I know the

future. Good fortune will be yours if you set us free.'

'Really?' Norfolk asked with wary interest. 'Prove it. Tell me

something that happens at the feast tonight. And no vague babblings

that could mean anything.'

'Er...' the Doctor deflated. 'I can't.'

'Ha!'

'Anne of Cleves's ship will arrive in Dover at five o'clock in the

afternoon on the 27th of December,' the Doctor said. 'Is that specific

enough for you?'

Norfolk blinked. 'You don't want to change that to "the storms will end

soon and that the ship would arrive at some point after midday"?'

'No.'

'I'm impressed with your simplicity.' Norfolk's smile suddenly turned to

a growl just as the Doctor relaxed and smiled back. 'It would take a

simpleton to think that I would welcome her arrival at all! Perhaps Henry

will like her.'

'He won't.'

Norfolk ignored him. ‘If he does, Cromwell will gain all the more

power. I have to make sure that the King is infatuated elsewhere before

Anne arrives.' He looked at the Doctor. 'Which, you tell me, is only two

days hence. Let me tell you the future I see, Doctor. I shall raise as many

doubts as I can, while making sure that the King shall have his choice of

as many maidens as I can throw at him. Your fate is to be a hostage for

your ward as long as she might be of interest to the King.'

'What if she doesn't do what you say? What if I tell the King you are

holding us prisoner?'

Norfolk rummaged in his desk and pulled out a pouch with a feather

and a little hair sticking out of it. 'Then I shall tell the King that I found this

charm among her possessions and that she must have bewitched us all.

What fate do you wish her to have, Doctor — to be the centre of the

King's attention or the centre of a burning fire?' He rose. 'But since you

seem too willing to flap your tongue, it is now my regretful duty to tell you

that you shall be spending the feast back here, under guard, lest your Nyssa not do her duty tonight.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Happy Christmas to you too.'

From his seat at the high table, Norfolk surveyed the girls down at the middle tables with satisfaction. He had ordered that Katherine and Nyssa be dressed in the best jewels and gowns that could be provided, but if Katherine looked more fetching in her French-fashioned clothing than Nyssa in the dowdier English styles, it wasn't anyone's fault, was it?

King Henry's eyes kept straying in that direction as well. Every time they caught him watching, Katherine would perk up and smile back at him. Nyssa, who couldn't manage to fake cheerfulness, just nodded with sombre dignity to the King. Just as well, for her serious ways made Katherine seem all the more fun and fetching.

Henry was well lubricated into seasonal spirit. 'Rejoice with me!' he told the people around him. 'I prayed that God send me a sign regarding my bride, and so he has done!' Henry pointed, and Norfolk's heart sank

— the ringed finger was stabbing straight at Nyssa. 'Look at her! Grave and wise, as befits a queen.'

'She is engaged to another,' Cromwell said smoothly from his seat on the King's right side.

Henry waved that objection away. 'These things can be broken.'

'As the chief minister well knows,' Norfolk needled. 'Otherwise, Your Majesty's intended bride would have already been wedded to the Duke of Lorraine.' He pretended as though a random thought struck him. 'You do have all the paperwork to prove that the engagement was broken?' he asked Cromwell solicitously.

'The ambassadors assure me that all the legalities have been followed,' Cromwell snapped shortly. He started to say something to Henry, but Norfolk cut him off, still maintaining his faux-considerate tone.

'Such was said for his majesty's Spanish bride as well. And we all know the tangle Catherine of Aragon's estate is in now, with the Spaniards claiming that they and not we own all that she died with. So I do hope that the ambassadors are quite correct. It would be such a shame to end up in the same position all over again.'

Henry frowned. The legal fights over his ex-queen's estate were almost as sore a subject as his leg.

'I assure your highness,' Cromwell said hastily, 'all has been in legal readiness for your wedding since the treaties were signed these three months past. If you wish this new girl, take her without marriage. She is no one. She is yours to do with as you please.'

Henry was still frowning. 'You dismissed Jane as a nobody and she is the only wife who provided me with a son.'

'Could this one?' Cromwell was as casual as if they were discussing hunting horses. 'She has small hips. She may well go the same way as our late Queen Jane; dead in her first childbirth. She is a pretty face and nothing more.'

'I like her right well,' Henry said stubbornly.

Cromwell shrugged. 'I can make Nyssa one of the Princess Anne's ladies-in-waiting if you wish to keep her in court.' He stopped to take a bite of the turducken and chew it thoroughly before adding casually, 'There is only one spot, so Katherine can make way for her, since the King prefers her.'

Norfolk growled. 'My niece has as much a right to a place in court as any!'

'Considering how the court career of your previous niece ended, I'm surprised you wish to send another.'

Norfolk wanted to hack at his dinner — or preferably Cromwell — with his belt knife. *Damn the man for bringing up Anne Boleyn!* Still, it was never wise to show even a moment's weakness. 'Have good cheer, Your Majesty. Doubtless if this Anne does not please you, your loyal chief minister will find a way to annul this wedding just as he did to the last Anne.'

Down at the lower table, which Henry had been watching all this time,

Katherine accidentally dropped a rare orange. It rolled forward across the

table as she squealed shrilly in dismay, and Norfolk could have happily

killed the scatterbrain right there for humiliating him.

But when she bent low to fetch it back, Henry's eyes finally left Nyssa.

'Cromwell,' he said, still staring down Katherine's cleavage as she leaned

over again to chatter at someone further down the table, 'We order you

to appoint Katherine Howard lady-in-waiting to the next queen. Call it a

Christmas present to Our beloved Duke of Norfolk.'

'Certainly sire,' Cromwell said through gritted teeth. He waved his

manservant forward and whispered a few instructions. The man nodded

and left the hall at a run.

'Your Majesty is most kind,' Norfolk said quietly. 'Happy Christmas!'

This time, the Doctor managed to charm his way out of being locked

into his room. It hadn't been hard to convince the man standing by his

door that he would have a better Christmas down among his peers, and

the Doctor would even go with him so that the guard could say he'd kept

watch the whole time. There wasn't any gossip about Nyssa as he'd

hoped, but at least things were warmer and friendlier down in the

kitchen.

He was eating bits of pie crust and playing the menservants at dice

when one of Norfolk's grooms came into the kitchen, knocking snow off

his boots. 'People have come back from the palace, then?' the cook

asked casually.

'Not yet, I was sent ahead,' the man called. He gave quiet orders to a

few of the underservants, who left at a run, filled a plate of his own, and

came to watch the game.

The Doctor had seen far too much of that fake casualness through his

lives to mistake it. When the groom put a friendly hand on his shoulder,

he knew. Leaning back to stretch, he murmured quietly, 'Do you want to

talk to me?'

'Message for you from my other master, Lord Cromwell,' was the

answer. If you and your nameless nobody brat aren't permanently gone

from court by the Feast of Stephen, he'll make sure you are both

permanently gone from this world.'

'I see.'

The man nodded sharply, stepping back. 'Your turn, I think.'

The Doctor rolled the dice. ‘So,' he asked the cook casually, ‘do you

have anything special planned for the Feast of Stephen?'

'Do I, he asks,' she scoffed. 'Don't I have a larder of swans ready?

And you lot eating all the leftover crust from them mince pies? Don't you

be worrying, we'll eat as well tomorrow as we will all the rest of the twelve days!'

'Good to hear!' *Just for once, for once, I'd like someone to give me a nice leisurely timetable. 'Be gone before the end of the month,' maybe. Or, 'You've got a year to get out of here' or perhaps, 'Please leave town as soon as you've finished your repairs and had a good hot breakfast.' Is*

that really too much to ask of an infinite universe?

He'd been pushing his companions to drink as much as possible in the name of Christmas cheer, but they remained stubbornly sober. Time for a little reverse psychology. The Doctor drained down the cup of wine they'd offered him, and banged it on the table. 'More!' Laughing, they filled it, then refilled it again and again. He drank to the company, he drank to the season, he drank to the King, and finally, when they told him it was time to return to his room before Norfolk caught him out, he drank to that.

It was a laughing, raucous couple that staggered up to his room. The guard was half carrying the Doctor with his arm around his shoulders, carefully manoeuvring him as the Doctor tried to slur his way through the lyrics to the song about the milkmaid from Bristol and her surprisingly endowed cow.

‘’Ang on, I can't find the key!' the guard said, patting his pockets with

his free hand. ‘’Ad it just a moment ago, now where could it be?'

‘Up my sleeve, actually,' the Doctor said clearly, pulling himself free.

'I'm so sorry about this, really I am...'

Nyssa had spent most of the day feeling like she was ready to pass

out at any moment. How did the women stand having their ribs crushed

and their legs swaddled like this? Katherine, far more familiar with this

sort of clothing, was bouncing and talking non-stop as a servant took

them back to their rooms. 'Wasn't that a wonderful evening? Did you see

Thomas? Isn't he handsome? I wonder if he jousts. Do you like jousting?

I went to a cock-fight once, but uncle says I shouldn't. Wasn't the food

wonderful? Did you see the peacock they sent to the King's table?

Wonderful! But I liked what we got.' Unfortunately, the prattle didn't cover

the sound of the lock snicking shut as the housekeeper secured them for

the evening. Katherine either didn't notice or didn't care. 'Such meats!

And all those different comfits and suckets! Did you see the King looking

at us? Do you think he liked us? Uncle says we're going to be ladies-in-

waiting! Isn't that wonderful? Isn't this the most wonderful Christmas that

has ever been? Isn't it everything you want?'

She stopped to look at Nyssa for a moment, who was so relieved at the silence that it took her a moment to realise that Katherine actually expected an answer.

'I want to leave with my friend,' Nyssa said quietly.

Katherine sighed. 'It's not at all like it is at the dowager duchess's house. She let us do what we want. I could see my beloved Francis all the time there, at least until the duchess found out.' She pouted. 'Then she sent me here and my uncle locks me away. If we were home, I'd know just what to do.

'Do you know where there's a spare key?'

'I've tried that one.' She grabbed a pillow, curling over it and sulking. 'I've tried bribing all the servants and it doesn't work. They won't give me a copy and they won't unlock me.'

The lock clicked open and someone in livery slid into the room.

'Oh, that's not fair! How much did you offer to pay them? I only had a few groats. I knew I should have gone up to half a sovereign.' Katherine gasped, but it wasn't a servant. The Doctor held his finger to his lips as he shut the door behind him.

'Won't our host notice that you're not in your room?' Nyssa pointed out.

'Someone is in there,' the Doctor pointed out. 'My guard. I switched places with him.'

'He won't tell?' Katherine asked, interestedly.

'He'd have to get the gag off first.' The Doctor shrugged. 'Bashing someone over the head and stealing his uniform is inelegant, but sometimes the old routines are best.'

'I don't know what to do. I suppose I should scream for help,' Katherine said doubtfully. 'Are you going to do something awful to me?'

‘No, just take my friend and go.'

‘Oh.' To Nyssa's surprise, Katherine held out her hand. 'I'll miss you.'

'You've been kind,' was all Nyssa could manage in honesty as she shook.

'With you gone, does this mean I get to be queen like uncle wants? He says I'll start as a lady-in-waiting, but if I'm very good to the King, he might make me his next queen after the German girl! That's how it was with Cousin Anne and Queen Jane, so I think he might be right. They were ladies-in-waiting too. But that would make five wives. That's a bit much, even for the King, don't you think? But I should like to be queen, I think. We could all have so much fun! They say you know the future. Will I?'

'Yes.' The Doctor sounded very sad, and Nyssa wondered why. 'Yes, Katherine Howard, you will be the Queen of England.' He touched the top of her head gently, then turned. ‘Nyssa, it's time to go. Katherine, I'm

going to lock you back in so your uncle doesn't suspect. Can you keep talking as if Nyssa was still here?'

She actually had to think about it, hard, before finally nodding. 'Yes, I can do that!'

As the door clicked shut again, she was enthusiastically asking the bedpost which dish of the feast it had enjoyed most.

The first thing Nyssa did was consign her gown and underpinnings to the wardrobe, with silent apologies to the next woman who might end up in that horrible corset. The second was to change back into her full native dress; it might not be very practical, but it was comfortable and familiar.

She was just settling down with a soothing science book in the library when she felt the TARDIS slam to a halt.

'Where are we now?' she asked the Doctor, hurrying back to the console room.

'Keeping a promise,' he said vaguely. He looked up. 'Do you know how to tumble?'

'What?'

'Tumble, cartwheel, do somersaults, anything like that?'

She stared blankly at him.

'How about juggling? Can you do that? Never mind, I'll give you some scarves. Anyone can juggle scarves.'

'Why are we...'

He ignored her, triggering the door. 'Just a tick and then it's off to Floriana.' With a tip of his panama hat — he had also changed back into his usual garb — he ducked outside.

Nyssa started to follow, only to stop with horror in the doorway.

'Doctor! We haven't gone anywhere at all!'

'Of course we have,' he said a bit defensively as he pulled three cricket balls out of his pocket and started juggling them. 'We've gone six days ahead and quite a few miles northward. One of my best short hops ever! It's New Year's Day 1540 — pity, we missed fireworks last night — and we're in Rochester Abbey. King Henry and his men rode up about half an hour ago.

'Doctor!'

'Don't worry, I'll have you out before he notices you. He's got his eyes on another woman today. And history says that her eyes were elsewhere.' Nyssa didn't budge. 'I don't understand.'

The Doctor grunted a bit in concentration as he pulled random items — a ball of twine, an apple with a bite out of it, a screwdriver and the battery pack for a fifty-first-century music player — out of his pockets and added them to the spinning balls. 'I told you, this is a temporal nexus. So many things were changing all at once; if one of them goes off track, all of history will derail. History says that Henry will have a

very

bad first impression of Anne of Cleves because when he first met her,

she kept looking out the window instead of paying attention to him. Add

that to all the doubts that Norfolk has raised already, and Henry will

practically run to Katherine. He's probably already started to flirt with her

for solace over losing you.'

'But if Anne sees me...'

'She doesn't know who you are. We look like wandering entertainers.'

People were turning to watch — not just the crowd in the street; faces

started appearing in the mullioned windows around the courtyard. With a

sigh, Nyssa looked around. The cobblestones were slick with slush and

even more unmentionable things; there was no way she was going to roll

around in that! With handstands and tumbling out of the question, she

started to twirl in one of the more energetic Traken dances. It was the

right choice; there was a little bit of applause and a scattering of pennies.

The Doctor nodded his approval and she danced a bit closer to him.

When she got within reach, he started mixing simple magic tricks into his

juggling, making things disappear in mid-spin only to pull them from her

hair or pockets and toss them up again. The applause became more

enthusiastic.

'Right, I think that'll do it,' the Doctor murmured in her ear. 'Bow with

me.

Nyssa did as she was told. The Doctor pulled a bouquet of paper flowers out of her ear and presented it to her. She accepted it with a deep curtsey, then allowed the Doctor to lead her back towards the TARDIS with several flourishes.

'One last trick!' he promised the audience, darting around the TARDIS to pound on every side. 'A solid wooden box, with no hidden doors! Yet look what happens when we enter...'

Princess Anne watched the show in the courtyard below. England was such a land of wonders! She had heard of such diversions and magical tricks but the sight of them had been deemed too frivolous and corrupting for the women of her court. The delicious sensation of being slightly naughty only made the entertainment more amusing.

'My lady, some of the English have come to greet you,' one of her attendants warned her.

Anne gave them a look, but was underwhelmed. Five men, led by an elderly, fat, limping figure who was giving her an unmistakably lascivious look. He said something in their rough tongue that she couldn't grasp. Then he tried to kiss her! Ugh! Didn't he know that she was to be his sovereign queen? Since she did not know the customs she did not know

how forward he was being. Set him down or thank him for his courtesy?

Unable to decide, she smiled thinly and avoided both question and

improper advances by shifting away to look at the entertainers. The fair-

haired magician had put his assistant into a large blue box. She had

heard of this trick with the disappearing assistant... but she had never

heard of a version where the magician followed the assistant in and then

everything — magician, assistant and box — all vanished at once!

Henry sighed with aggravation as Anne leaned out of the window,

applauding wildly.

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Peaceable Kingdom

Steven Savile

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

All heads turned to the sky as the beast descended, blazing fire as it

scorched the desert sands.

What is this monstrosity that disturbs our feast?

We know not, Orwen Kleth, the hive mind answered the Kortani

warrior.

It will not claim our kill, my brothers. Eat, have your fill on the flesh of

the weak. Let the demon find its own quarry.

Kleth sensed the heat-flare from the vents as the demon came lower.

It was a curiously insectoid thing, much like a Kortani in many

regards,

though vast. Six spindle-legs detached from the main bulk of the thing's

belly and settled in the sand, burrowing deep for stability. The vents

roared a final time before the fire in their hearts went out.

His brothers abandoned the kill, scuttling left and right as they formed

a ring around the eerily silent beast from the sky.

The demon's carapace ticked as it cooled.

Orwen Kleth sensed danger as he moved forward, his dead mate

forgotten. There was a wrongness to the creature: it had no noticeable

odour and stood unmoving, a ring of black eyes staring blindly across the

desert. Kleth's palps quivered in anticipation of the fight the peculiar sky-

demon promised. He thrilled to the prospect of blood. He would prove his

might by gutting the beast and revelling in its corpse.

He was Kortani!

To me, brothers.

The ring of Kortani warriors tightened at his command, obeying the

hive mind unquestioningly.

Kleth prowled the length of the beast, moving slowly, taunting it, but

still the great beast from the sky did not flinch.

The sky-demon hissed, its maw opening. Huge mandibles folded

back in three powerful contractions to reveal a blurred silhouette bathed

in brilliant white light at its heart.

Kleth bristled, scenting the creature that descended from the belly of the sky-demon. It was small, weak, and it stank. Kleth wallowed in its stench, learning his enemy from the odours of its body.

Who of you would feed, my brothers?

I would, Orwen Kleth.

Then it shall be so, brother Kail. We hunger to share its taste with you.

I will open my mind to you all so that you may devour the beast with me, my brothers. What is mine will be yours. So is the strength of the tribe. We are Kortani!

We are Kortani! The hive mind resounded, taking the chant up. *We are Kortani!*

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Kail surged forward to meet the figure as it descended from the belly of the great beast. It was clad in a suit of white, its fabric peculiarly luminous beneath the moon. Indeed its flesh was white, as were the cores of its eyes. ‘Cth marl tern sar.' The voice was soft, crooning as it wrapped itself around the ears of the Kortani, and utterly senseless.

'Amu varl ansgar,' the sounds found shape and substance as they slowly

shifted into words the hive mind understood. 'Peace, children. I am a missionary of the word.'

'We have no need of words or peace. We are Kortani!' Kail roared. All around him his brothers chittered appreciatively, their excitement lending

the air a sensual musk.

'I have no weapons,' the missionary said, holding up his hand to

prove that they were empty.

'Then you shall die easily,' Kail mocked.

'I have no fear of dying, Kortani,' the missionary said, moving in closer

to Kail. There was something disquieting about the creature's surety; he

walked with a purpose and Kleth had no liking for it. 'I come to you as a

believer. I would share my gospel if you will listen. I have travelled far,

from beyond the stars, and there is much I would share.'

'Why should we waste our lives, White Preacher? We have nothing to

learn from you, no matter if you are from the dust of the moon or the

jewels in the sky. There is no strength in your words. Like all words, they

are hollow. Now you will die.' Kail sprang, launching himself bodily at the

missionary, but instead of scything through the man's throat the Kortani's

talons raked through the displaced air where he had stood.

'Must it be this way?' Eyes filled with sadness, the white preacher

bowed his head, as though accepting his fate.

Kail charged again, and again failed to strike his prey. The white

preacher had not moved. He looked up, meeting the furious gaze of the

Kortani warrior. 'A sign, perhaps? You seek to wound me, and I present

myself as your willing victim, and yet your talons miss the mark time and

again. A wise man would think it was not meant to be.'

He has power, the hive mind hissed, outraged at Kail's humiliation.

Kleth saw again and again from every angle imaginable the preacher's

submission, Kail's ungainly charge carrying him through the air to where

surely the preacher stood head bowed. The recollections did not match,

as though the light around the white preacher was somehow displaced,

making him appear to be where he was not. It was the shadow that gave

his trickery away, falling some distance from his feet. Orwen Kleth closed

the revelation away from the rest of the hive mind. He would use it, in

time, but for now he would enjoy Kail's humbling. And later he would do

his thick-headed kin the honour of consuming him so that he may live on

in the greatness that was Orwen Kleth. In that he would give Kail

redemption. His soul would find its way into Kleth's next get and be born

again.

What is this word he speaks of?

We do not care!

Words have no strength!

And yet somehow he is protected from our brother...

Kleth scuttled forward. 'Tonight is the night of the Winnowing, White Preacher,' the Kortani warrior said, his voice low, mellifluous. 'If your words are to be heard you must first survive the darkness. Are you willing to partake in the ritual?'

'I would be heard,' the missionary said, craning to meet Orwen Kleth's cold gaze.

'Good,' the Kortani warrior rasped, his palps quivering. 'I suggest you run; my brothers are hungry and you interrupted their meal.' Kleth dislodged a small stone with his talon and almost negligently discarded

it. The small stone flew true, inches above the preacher's shadow. Two things happened: the projectile veered off course as though deflecting off

some unseen obstacle, and the white preacher flinched, wincing involuntarily. Kleth loosed a satisfied grunt as the preacher's already white complexion paled. 'I said run!'

The preacher did not give the creature the satisfaction.

He took a small leather-wrapped book from his pocket and opened it, his finger gently turning the brittle pages until he found the words he sought. He read them, obviously drawing some comfort from the message hidden in the ink.

'I will not run, Kortani. You may be a warrior but I am a man of the word, and my word is my salvation. If you choose to cut me down, my lord will smite thee with righteous fury.'

'There are no gods, White Preacher. All of our gods are dead,' Kleth said.

He talks of deities, does the fool not understand?

We have no need of others. We are Kortani!

He is a peculiar soul, I wonder what his flesh tastes like?

As all flesh, no doubt brother mine, rancid in the stomach, sweet in the mouth.

'We killed them,' Kail said, still bowed from his wild charge. He shook his head aggressively, as though seeking to intimidate the preacher. Both word and action were an empty threat.

‘If you say,' the white preacher said, turning to Kail, 'it must be true.'

The Kortani bristled, rising from his crouch in a powerful spring. The momentum carried him past the preacher and left him scratching in the sand, shaking his head as though to rid his thoughts of the hive mind's mocking laughter.

The white preacher turned, inclining his head to Kleth, and walked almost arrogantly back up the long ramp into the belly of the sky-demon.

The wound sealed with a rapid triplicate hiss.

Orwen Kleth stared up at the unmarked skin of the demon, curious as to what form of trickery this was; if it was possible for his flesh to be separated from his shadow by three feet it was almost certain that nothing about the white preacher could possibly be as it seemed.

Kail straightened, standing tall on his hind legs, beat his talons

against the hard shell of his carapace, drumming out his anger and frustration.

Kleth lost interest in the posturing and returned to the split carcass of his mate, burying his face in her soft innards.

Throughout the night Kail and some of the younger Kortani scaled the body of the giant sky-demon looking for a way into its centre. Their talons

scratched the hard surface, not once finding a weakness they could exploit. It was impenetrable.

Night stretched into day. Across the hive the families rejoiced for those who had survived the Winnowing. There was no lament for the dead; they were not worthy. Their carcasses were dragged out into the sun to rot so they would not stink up the warren.

We are strengthened, the hive mind crooned, welcoming the survivors into its midst.

Yet there is weakness amongst us, a voice dissented, and all saw the image of Kail prostrated at the feet of the stranger from beyond the stars.

None could deny the warrior's humiliation.

There is no place for weakness. It is not the Kortani way, a single voice whispered, its words carrying to every single mind within the hive.

We listen to the wisdom of Orwen Kleth, they answered.

Brother Kail is brother no more. Let the new blood go out on the hunt

this night and show the kinless one what it is to be Kortani. A test for them, a judgement on him. Such is my wisdom, Let his death be slow, his screams be agonised, his undoing complete.

Let the young be blooded! the hive mind chorused.

The white preacher emerged from the shell, his face beatific as he strode across the sands towards the black spots in the cliff face. He liked the name they had given him, it had a simple truth about it.

He felt no fear, for savage as this brutish species obviously was, he had sensed a great nobility about its leader. The creature had exhibited great cunning in discerning the defraction of light from his displacement device; it was no mere animal, of that he was sure. Not only had it reasoned the displacement, it had countered it, hitting him with its rock; though how it could possibly have known where to aim, the missionary had no idea. It was, above all, proof of the creature's cunning.

The missionary's smile broadened. These were exactly the kind of lost souls he had sought, predators in need of salvation. He would deliver the word to them so that they could move beyond brutality and suffering, and in doing so, evolve. It was the way of all things; they understood that, these hostile sand dwellers. They culled the herd, allowing only the strongest to mature into adulthood. It was primitive genetic control, winnowing out the propensity for weakness from the

species. In its own way it was exactly what the universe did: it adapted,

dominant genes surviving, others forced to mutate in order to live on.

That too was the nature of all things, always looking for a way to avoid

extinction. It was no surprise to the missionary that the microcosm so

precisely mirrored the macrocosm.

Even this early in the day the sun's heat was fierce. His skin crawled

with it as he ascended the curious weathered stair, rising towards the

hive's gateway. The sun beat down, throwing his shadow far down the

jagged mountain. His shadow... The missionary allowed himself a small

glimmer of satisfaction — it was almost certainly nothing more arcane or

primal than his errant shadow that had betrayed his physical

displacement to the Kortani. Knowing their secret was as powerful a

thing as them knowing his. He could work the device's failing to his

advantage. It was a question of knowing; knowledge subverted surprise,

offering him once more the upper hand.

Out of breath and gasping he stood on the threshold to the hive,

peering into the darkness. The skitter and scratch of claws on stone told

him all he needed to know, the Kortani were aware of his presence.

One cautious step at a time, he descended. He saw them in the dark

places, watching. They did not move. They did not make a sound. His

footfalls echoed down the stairs and back up to meet him, the acoustics

turning them altogether more threatening. Ten steps down, the

missionary cleared his throat, his cough abrasive within the strange

column of noise.

'I have come to claim my right to be heard. I survived the night, as

you bade me.'

'Then speak,' came a voice.

The missionary took another step, deeper into the darkness. His eyes

refused to adjust. He could make out nothing beyond the curious liming

luminescence around the walls of huge hollowed-out shaft. Raw black

wounds pitted the chamber; the mouths of the countless passages that

fed the hive. Subtle degrees of black writhed within the wounds, the only

hint of life beyond the dark. 'I would see you.'

'We see you, White Preacher, it is enough.'

'I come to you as a friend.' All around the chamber a chitinous chorus

rose. It sounded like laughter. 'You do not believe me? No, well why

should you?'

'These are your precious words?' A Kortani warrior emerged from the

darkness, its talons scraping on the sandstone as it moved towards him.

'Words are life,' the missionary began.

'No, blood is life. Hunger is life. Rutting and defecating, these things

are life. Words are not life. Words do not feed our mates or silence our

enemies. Words are meaningless, forgettable.'

The chittering rose to an appreciative crescendo. The missionary looked to his own shadow, almost non-existent in the unorthodox light.

'With words we communicate our love to our kin. We grow as people. We express ourselves. I cannot imagine a world without songs of love, without poetry of the heart, without words whispered between lovers, without promises kept and promises broken. I do not want to imagine such a world... and yet you choose to live in it.'

'We have no love for our kin. We respect their strength, we admire their ruthlessness, we relish their prowess in battle, that is our world.'

'Life is not violence, it cannot be. Without words we cannot love, there can be no compassion, no benevolence.'

'You speak of weaknesses, White Preacher. You would come into our homes and talk of things we despise? Are you truly that foolish?'

'Is it foolish to believe that violence begets violence, pain begets pain, death and treachery. To live by tooth and claw is to die by tooth and claw. It need not be that way, hear my words, take them to heart.'

'And become weak like Kail, humiliating ourselves at your feet? There is no place for such in society.'

'Do not be too proud, Kortani, lest you stumble and fall.'

'We are strong.' The voice was the same voice, but it came from the darkness behind Kleth. 'We do not fall.' This time it came from above, the

same voice coming from different mouths. The missionary did not know

where to direct his words. The effect was disquieting. It scared him.

He had so many words but could not think of any that would pierce

these violent creatures' thick shells. Their dogmatic relentlessness

frightened him. It was easy to claim faith in words, but so much more

difficult when threatened with tooth and claw.

'Even the faithful bleed,' the missionary said, distracted.

'We do not understand,' came the damned voice again, from behind

him this time, almost soft enough to breathe in his ear. His skin crawled.

'You speak in circles, White Preacher.' And that staccato voice

continued, emanating from all around the chamber. 'Your words solve

nothing and we have no need of salvation. You have spoken, now let us

show you how we deal with weakness.'

And they came out of the shadows, six smaller males. Between them

they dragged the one who had tried to attack him.

'This is the Kortani way,' declared their leader, inclining his head as

though swept away by internal voices. 'Our young blooded. Eat, my

brothers, absorb Kail the kinless one's strengths, purify his corpse of the

weaknesses that saw him stumble at the feet of the white preacher.' To

the missionary, 'Mark this well. Where words fail, tooth and talon rend.'

The missionary stood in mute horror as the six tore their prisoner

apart bodily, powerless to stop their savagery.

The shrieks of the dying creature resonated through the walls of the

shaft, screams rising until the entire hive sang with the glory of its death.

All around him the violent creatures rejoiced, secreting vile pheromones

in their frenzied clamour, the mad chorus spiralling out of control as the

young warriors tore at the flesh of their victim. Despite his horror it was

impossible for the missionary not to be caught up in the adrenaline of the

kill. He felt sick to the stomach at the thought.

And then there was stillness, the last note of violence reverberating

throughout the shaft and falling into complete and utter silence.

The missionary did not move. Tears stained his cheeks; tears for

these hopeless creatures, tears for their victim.

'You see?' The leader broke the silence.

'I see nothing but pointless death,' the missionary said, his words dry

in his throat. 'Last night he was a proud warrior, now he is nothing. How

can you do this? How can you strip him of his position in your society, his

very meaning?'

'We honour the kinless one in death. He lives on in the guts of our

young bloods. That is enough.'

The missionary reached into his pocket for the battered book. His

hand trembled as he cracked open the spine and turned to the words he

wanted to share: 'The greatest gift of life is the creation of something

beyond it, the creation of something that outlasts it. The greatest sin: to

forget what makes life worth living.' He closed the book.

'Your words mean nothing, preacher.'

'No, Kortani, my words mean everything. This slaughter is sin, it robs

the future of so much possibility.'

'It eradicates weakness.'

'But things evolve. Weaknesses today become our greatest strengths

tomorrow.'

'What need have we of being strong tomorrow if we are strong today?

We have heard enough. Leave now, if you would live to see this weak

tomorrow you speak of.'

The missionary moved back, his shoe-heel hitting the base of the

stair. 'May your savage brood never turn on you, Kortani.'

'No, White Preacher, may they turn on me one day, when I am weak

and a disgrace to my family. That is their duty as Kortani warriors. I

would expect no less of them. Just as I slew my father, so too will my son

deliver me to oblivion.'

The Doctor adjusted his panama hat and polished his two-tone

brogues on the backs of his trouser legs. He checked the time on his fob

watch, tapping the glass sharply, and reached across the console to

grab

his umbrella; it was a pointless affectation given that the readings

insisted Mitidiki was a desert planet with zero probability of precipitation

in its current stage of orbit, but he liked the familiarity of the handle in his

grip.

With a second minor adjustment of the hat he opened the TARDIS

doors and stepped out into the blistering heat of the high noon sun. The

old girl had landed thirty feet beyond the shade of a staggering cliff-face.

It was beyond hot. He opened the umbrella with a flourish,

immediately shielding himself from the worst of the sun. 'There is more

than one way to skin a cat,' the Doctor mumbled. Talking to himself was

becoming a hard habit to break.

He craned his neck, peering up at the clear blue sky. Shading his

eyes he scanned the cliff-top. The sharp contours of the cliff were broken

intermittently by dark hollows crawling up its face. He walked into the

shade, poking around at the base of the cliff.

At first glance it appeared utterly unremarkable, brittle sandstone and

sediment. It wasn't until he brushed his fingers across the rock-face that

the fine grains of wind-borne sand fell away to expose primitive carvings

etched into the stone. The Doctor quickly brushed more of the sand

clear, revealing an elaborate interlacing of images. Erosion had left them

barely legible but there was enough for the Doctor to make out a little of

the symbols on display. In every culture the Doctor had encountered, the

renditions of life always mirrored the physiology of the native species.

Judging by these crude markings the inhabitants of Mitidiki were a

curious hybrid of scorpion and spider. Such a species would fit the harsh

terrain, proving nature's wisdom once again. He brushed away more of

the sand.

'My, my,' he muttered as his fingers exposed what, no matter how he

looked at it, could only be described as a crude drawing of a spacecraft

hovering above the heads of the inhabitants. It was a curious carving.

Certainly not what he had expected to find. Cave paintings and primitive

carvings were typical, they represented certain types of image, more

often than not a hunt. In this case the place of the threat was taken up

by... he tilted the shade of the umbrella to get a better view, brushing

aside more of the fine grains of sand... yes, it was unmistakable. An

Akthon Mark 2 long-range shuttle.

He scratched at his eyebrow, shaking his head slowly.

The sound of rocks falling startled him.

A scattering of small stones bounced off the umbrella in rapid succession.

The Doctor ducked instinctively, waiting them out. He was grateful once again for the umbrella's protection.

He backed away from the rock-face.

Primitive creatures with recorded knowledge of space travel; it wasn't unheard of, but it did present a curious dichotomy that gave his mind something to wrestle with for a while. It was, quite obviously, one thing to worship natural satellites like the moon or the sun; indeed, almost all species offered devotions to the unknown stars at some point during their development, but it was something else entirely to carve a fairly accurate rendition of a 41st millennium starcraft into a rock wall.

If it waddles like a duck and quacks like a mallard, the odds are it is probably le canard, he thought to himself, screwing his eyes up against the intensity of the sun. A flash of something bright glittered close to the horizon and caught his eye. He struggled to make out what it was, walking towards the erratic light with his hand half-shielding his eyes. It began to take shape as he neared.

'An Akthon Mark 2... well I never.'

The Doctor walked towards the light, marvelling at the wrongness of finding a long-range shuttle abandoned in the middle of the desert. Only

it obviously hadn't been abandoned. The sand had barely begun to drift

up around the stabilising legs. The sand around their base was fused

and glassy where the engines had heated it. There was a fine dusting of

sand that had blown over the smooth glass, hardly enough to signify any

long abandonment. The Doctor walked three slow circuits around the

ship, hemming and tutting. It didn't make a great deal of sense, the wall

carvings were obviously considerably older than the starcraft, making

them what? A prophecy?

There are more things in heaven and earth... Well, off-Earth

technically, the Doctor thought.

He stopped halfway through the fourth circuit, brought up short by the

curious sensation of eyes on the back of his neck. He shrugged it off.

The sensation passed almost as quickly as it had come.

His own footprints had worn an erratic circle around the

circumference of the Akthon, but they were far from the only tracks.

Indeed, they provided the wheel to the spokes of the others.

So which ones will lead me to where I want to be? Riddle me that,

Alice...

He settled upon the thinnest set of tracks and set off after whatever

had made them.

It became obvious less than quarter of a mile away, beyond the crest of a dune.

Six enormous creatures, a curious hybrid of scorpion and spider as he had suspected, but more akin to a mutated grasshopper, truth be told, lay hunkered down unmoving in the dune's lee.

The Doctor held up his hands, the umbrella high above his head, expecting the creatures to challenge him.

None of them moved.

He approached cautiously, expecting them to turn on him at any moment.

And still not one of them moved, not so much as a palp bristling. The Doctor coughed softly, once. No reaction.

And for good reason. They were not creatures, not any more at least.

He stood inside a ring of six hollowed-out exoskeletons. The Doctor rapped his knuckles on one of the husks; it echoed dully, the shell transformed into a hard leather. Whatever had lived within it was dead and gone. He studied the floor for several minutes, looking for signs of a struggle, but the sand was barely disturbed. Whatever had killed these creatures had been quick; shockingly so. There was barely a scuffle in the sand. The Doctor knelt beside one of the husks, feeling the deep-set creases in the shell.

'Every corpse tells a story. So tell me, what could have done this to

you, my beautiful shell?'

He found a clue in the creature's palps. They were dessicated, every ounce of water had been leached out of them. The Doctor crouched, retrieving a small torch from his pocket and shining it into the creature's mouth. It confirmed his suspicions: cobwebs of stuff, not flesh, not any more, clung to the sides of the exoskeleton, and there was a fine dusting of what might have been sand built up like sediment across the bottom.

'You poor thing,' the Doctor said, turning off his torch. 'Something drained every ounce of water from your body... but how? And why? Why just reduce you to dust and leave your to blow away on the wind? What is capable of such malice?'

'Don't move, stranger!' a harsh voice rasped.

The Doctor held his hands up, torch still in his right hand, umbrella in his left, and turned slowly.

Six more of the creatures lined up across the ridge of the dune but these ones were most definitely alive. They were larger than the hollow exoskeletons; fully matured adult males, the Doctor reasoned. Most likely a hunting party.

'I know how it looks,' the Doctor began, cursing his magpie-mind's

curiosity.

'Silence! You have not earned the right to speak.' The largest of the males scuttled forward, descending the lee-side of the dune. Its claws sank deep into the sand, giving it a precision of movement only nature and evolution could provide.

'He stands over our young. The hive mind cannot find them. They are closed. Gone.'

'They are dead,' a third voice chittered, almost identical to the first, though with a subtle nuanced shift in intonation, less sure, more subordinate.

'Then they were weak if this runt bested them,' a fourth, almost indistinguishable from the others, observed harshly. 'I did not — ' the Doctor objected.

'Silence!'

'It is the cycle of life. The weak perish. They were not strong enough. We shall consume them that they might be absorbed back into the Kortani and reborn worthy.'

'Oh for pity's sake! I did not do this!'

'There is no pity,' the voice cut him short. And the way the creature said that sent a shiver through the Doctor's soul. He had heard another species use the same words, the same inflection, when they faced him. The air filled with a pungent aroma, the creatures secreting some kind of enzyme that reeked of their bloodlust.

'There has to be,' the Doctor said. 'There has to be pity.'

'He is our prisoner now.'

'He shall pay for his crimes against our young bloods.'

'He shall die as they have done. That will be our justice.'

* * *

The white preacher walked across the desert sands. The moon was high in the sky, the winds carrying the dirge of females to him. They had gathered to burn the husks of their young.

He watched them, alone in mourning their loss. It was not the deaths that hurt, it was the loss itself. A night earlier they had been rejoicing their own strength, that their brood had flourished, surviving the Winnowing. Death now was a slap; their offspring were no more blessed

than those that fell during the culling, their genes no more potent or powerful. They might as well have died with the other mates — and perhaps that was what they feared most, that their own usefulness was spent. The males did not care in the slightest. They had made that painfully obvious. It was nature. The fundamental notion of the survival of

the species was one of strength. That their young warriors had died marked them as weak.

His throat was parched, the sand rubbing raw at the back when he swallowed.

He knew better. Those few males were not weak. They were proud, arrogantly so. They refused to listen to his words even as he begged

them. Instead they threw themselves into the slaughter of Kail. They consumed the flesh of their own kin. It was vile and repugnant.

'Violence is answered by violence, death by death; it is the way of nature. You live a life of violence; a violent death is yours.' His voice was flat and utterly void of emotion. He turned his face to the sky, 'I tried to talk to them. I truly did. It was not my fault.' It was theirs. They had encouraged his thirst. They had brought it upon themselves with their lusts, brother eating brother. They had lit the fire within him — he had to quench it. 'It was not my fault,' he repeated, the burning rising within him once more just at the thought of it.

But it was his fault. He had stood over them as they screamed, limbs flailing desperately as the soft wet flesh beneath their hard carapaces steamed and evaporated until there was nothing left of them to be consumed by their elders. There would be no glorious rebirth for these monsters. He had made sure of that. They were gone.

He had left no flesh for their ritual consummation. He turned his back on the pyres. He needed to drink. It was a glorious feeling, the total and utter desire to consume. He listened to the night, beyond the wailing mothers, to the faint rush of running water, and continued walking, pulling off his white suit as he went. He was drawn to the deep cleft he had first noticed the night before, and knelt, naked, on the brim, dipping

his hands into the moonlit stream.

The water rippled around his fingers. It felt good, so good. The

missionary closed his eyes, savouring it. The chill touch went beneath

his skin, seeping further and further into him.

Still it wasn't enough.

He rose slowly, water still dripping from his fingers, and stepped down

into the cleft, immersing himself completely in the running water. He

ducked low so it washed over his head. He felt the urgency of the water

all around him, pushing him, bullying him. And the external pressure was

answered within him as the water revitalised his flesh.

He opened his mouth and drank deeply of the river.

He swallowed lungful after lungful as though drowning. He opened his

throat so that the silty water could take away the burning inside him, until

sated, he surged up, invigorated.

He refused to believe that they could not change. Even insects could

evolve. He would break the warrior mind.

He would teach the Kortani to be merciful.

The Kortani dug out a huge pit in the shifting sand, dragging their

talons through the ground until it was good and deep. The wind stirred,

lifting a dervish of sand and swirling it across the dunes. Two of the creatures stood on either side of the Doctor, the wicked barbs of their tails quivering with anticipation. The Time Lord could taste their hunger-secretions in the air. It did little to calm his nerves. He closed his eyes, reducing his world to a single sensation: the cold thrill of his would-be executioner's talons on his neck.

His breath slowed, the twin beat of his hearts regulating the rise and fall of his ribcage. He listened to the elements. He had died more than once, and oddly that familiarity with it made the intimacy of execution all the more frightening. It was no longer the unknown — it was an intimately familiar agony, every cell in his system being reborn, rewritten like some hugely sophisticated chameleon gene re-creating him as his next incarnation. There were limits to his immortality; the longer he lived in one body the more the threat of losing it ached. There was still so much to do. He wasn't ready to give up on the old clown just yet.

'We can talk about this, surely?'

The heat from the desert sun beat down ferociously. Sweat matted the Doctor's tangled hair flat to his scalp. His shirt clung wetly to his back and each individual grain of sand burned into his knees.

'We have no need of words, little man. Be strong as you die. There is honour in accepting defeat by a superior foe,' the Kortani, Orwen Kleth

said.

His executioner's claw twitched, knocking the panama from the Doctor's head.

He watched his hat spin a lazy circle in the sand before coming to rest at Orwen Kleth's clawed feet.

Behind the crowding Kortani he saw a man in a white suit. The heat didn't seem to touch the newcomer. He walked with a purpose, his suit

iridescent in the furious sun. In his hands he held a battered leather book. As he drew nearer he began to run, as though suddenly understanding the tableau being played out before him.

'Wait!' the newcomer cried, twenty feet away and obviously flustered as he struggled with the pages of his book.

'This is not your place, White Preacher,' Orwen Kleth barked, rounding on him. 'This is Kortani justice.'

‘Will you not listen? This man's life is not yours to take! You have to listen!'

'Silence, preacher! The time for your words has passed, unless you seek to join him in the pit?'

‘I'd do as he says if I were you,' the Doctor said, seeing the shocked confusion on the man's face.

The man did not sweat; it was a peculiar thing to notice given the

circumstances but one that made a disturbing amount of sense to the

Doctor given the little he had already deduced from the dessicated exoskeletons of his alleged victims.

‘No! No! You can't! You have to listen!' The preacher stumbled forward, throwing himself on his knees as though to plead for their mercy.

Close to, the skin of his cheeks and the line his hair showed signs of flaking. Crusty white flecks, like an extreme psoriasis, had spread across his left cheek.

‘Do not beg, preacher. It betrays weakness,' Kleth said, quite matter-of- factly.

'There is no place for weakness in this world,' another Kortani mocked.

They never spoke alone, the Doctor realised. It was as though a collective mind drove their voice, each finishing the thought for the one before.

'Oh do shut up,' the Doctor muttered, exasperated. 'I'm trying to think.'

'You have no need of thoughts, stranger. Soon your skull will be opened and your brains will be baked by the noon sun. Then the mothers of the slain young bloods will each taste some of you so that they can have one last communion with their kin. That is our judgement.'

'Oh, you have no idea...'

'You have been judged guilty,' Kleth said. 'Do not dishonour yourself.'

'Oh, for the love of—'

'Silence!'

The talons dug into the Doctor's back as the creatures pushed him forwards into the deep pit and he was falling.

They stared down at him, their faces expressionless when they saw the Doctor huddled in the corner of the pit, pressed up against the wall of slipping sand as he tried to stay within the scant shade it offered.

The sun moved, changing the shadow.

The Doctor scuttled across to the other side of the pit, doing his best not to bring a shower of sand cascading down to fill the hole.

They stopped watching but he had no idea if he was alone.

He could feel the dampness of low water beneath him, seeping up through the sand. It was impossible to tell how much further down the water table lay.

He tried to think. The white preacher did not sweat, the young bloods were drained of all water. There had to be a link between the two things.

Had to be. The white preacher was almost certainly the pilot of the Akthon shuttle, a missionary of some sort. Then what of the drawings on the cliff? Was it the preacher's first visit? How could it be, those pictograms were almost as old as the cliff itself. And why an Akthon shuttle? It was hardly a missionary's vehicle of choice. It was a haulage ship. But they had to be related, didn't they? All of them. Yet, none of it

quite fitted together. It was close but he knew he was reaching, clutching

at straws.

The Doctor's panama hat, and then his open umbrella, came tumbling into the pit.

A moment later a man's voice, pitched barely above a whisper, followed. 'Here, the sun will be at its zenith soon and there will be no corners to hide in. Without water you'll be delirious by nightfall, dead in two days. Believe me, it's no way you want to die.'

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, setting the hat on his head as the white preacher leaned over the edge of the pit. A small flurry of sand sheered away from the lip and spilled into the hole. It sounded for all the world like a tidal surge of water washing up against a beach.

The preacher tore a strip of cloth from his shirt, wadding it up, and squeezed his fist. Water trickled between his fingers. 'The desert sun is amazing, with nothing but heat it undoes our minds so we start believing we see the impossible. Here, drink this, it will help.' The preacher reached into the pit, and dropped the swathe of sodden linen into the Doctor's lap.

The Doctor raised it to his lips and sucked the water down gratefully. It tasted of nothing.

'Thank you, again,' the Doctor said, fully aware that his eyes hadn't deceived him. A human, this far gone with dehydration, could easily have assumed it was a trick of his mind that made the water look as though it had been squeezed from the priest's palm. It was no trick, though it begged a hundred impossible questions, each one touching base with the other questions that had been niggling at the back of his mind ever since landing.

'It was nothing.'

'Oh, on the contrary, it was really quite a sacrifice, I suspect.'

'Well, that depends on what you consider a sacrifice, doesn't it? Indeed, it rather depends upon what you consider a kindness. Is it a kindness to prolong your agony by a day or two considering the inevitability of your death? Surely a terrible swift sword is more of a mercy, isn't it?'

The Doctor rubbed at the base of his neck, and grinned. 'Not if you ask the condemned man. Tell me, what is a civilised gentleman like yourself doing amongst these savages?' The Doctor placed an unnatural emphasis on the final word, playing to what he was sure were the missionary's prejudices.

The white preacher paced along the edge of the hole, casting a long shadow into the pit.

He stopped, hands on knees, and leant down. 'I am here for their own

good,' he said, finally. 'Savages can only survive for so long. They must

evolve or die out, it's the nature of the universe.'

'Is it now?'

'Yes, yes. Violence breeds a finite society. To rule by the sword is to

die by the sword. That is the quality of the world they have built. That is

the rule of life they have laid down. That is their doom.'

‘So you came to show these creatures the error of their ways?'

'Precisely!' The white preacher hopped about from foot to foot becoming

increasingly agitated.

'I must be getting old — nine hundred years will do that to a brain —

but I just don't understand. Why come here of all places in the universe?

Surely there are creatures worthy of saving that live in more hospitable

climes?'

Above him the white preacher laughed. It was not an altogether

pleasant sound.

'Worth saving? Well, that is a noble concept for a prisoner to worry

about, isn't it? Shall we say that the Kortani have come to a crossroads

in their evolution and leave the rest unsaid?'

'How so?' the Doctor asked, his mind racing, drawing in half-

remembered fragments of everything and nothing: the ship, the cliff

drawings, the dessicated exoskeletons, and the water oozing out of the preacher's palm. There was a link, there had to be! But the more he worried at it the more elusive it became.

'Change or die out, the eternal dilemma. They have one last chance to listen but they won't, their kind never do.'

'And then what?'

'Then they will understand the concept of mercy, though they will find none in this harsh world they have created for themselves. By sundown every Kortani will have been given a choice. It is not my fault that their choice will inevitably lead to their extinction.'

The Doctor shook his head. He stared at the white preacher's bland face, struggling to reconcile the brutality of his message with the soft voice delivering the words. 'You killed the others, didn't you?'

'I gave them a choice, I begged them not to kill. They made their choice. No one will mourn their deaths, that is the nature of this place. If one of their kind dies, the survivors write it off as weak. They are fools.'

The white preacher sneered. 'Still, be grateful, their deaths have given you a little more life.'

The Doctor looked at the rag in his hand, and it came to him then, like the links of an elaborate puzzle drawing together.

'A hydrovore? Of course you are! But why would a hydrovore risk coming to a desert planet?' The Doctor screwed up his face, not liking

the way these thoughts were leading him. 'There's nothing here for you

to feed on except...

'Except?'

'Except you knew that they would never change — didn't you? You

were counting on it. You came here to feed on the Kortani.'

'Very good.'

'So why offer me sustenance? Why not drink me while you had the

chance?'

'Who says the chance has gone?' the hydrovore said. 'But for now, I

have a terrible thirst.' He turned his back, disappearing beyond the pit's

edge.

'Wait!' But the soft crunch of sand told the Doctor all he needed to

know: the hydrovore had gone in search of fresh prey.

And the Doctor was helpless to prevent him.

Though the thought niggled at the back of his mind, should he care?

That the notion even crossed his mind disturbed the Time Lord more

than anything else he had encountered since landing. Other voices,

hated voices, crackled across his memory, demanding an end to the

Doctor. The echoes of the past set a chill in his bones, so close were the

Daleks in every way to these sand dwellers. Equally capable of violence,

both brutal warrior races that suffered no compunction in eradicating

an

enemy from the face of the planet. *So alike... And yet so different,* the

Doctor told himself. He didn't know whether he believed himself, though.

How different were they in truth? Twin ideologies centred around the

superiority of their species were ingrained in everything they did. The

Kortani had no desire to reach for the stars and conquer galaxies... Yet,

the voice of doubt wormed away at the back of his mind. It was nature,

the oldest lesson of all: the survival of the fittest. 'Yes, yes, it's nature. It's

also genocide,' the Doctor barked, angry at himself. One predator killing

another was no more acceptable than any other form of murder.

The edge of the pit was ten feet above his head, impossibly out of

reach — and he couldn't even begin to try to scale the side wall without

bringing it all down on top of him.

'That's it!' the Doctor shouted triumphantly and grabbed the open

umbrella. 'More ways to skin a cat, indeed!' Holding it firm in his right

hand, he ran at the side wall and jumped, throwing himself at the sand

hard enough to knock the wind out of his lungs. The umbrella's tines

cleared the edge. He dragged them back, pouring sand down into his

prison and stepped back to avoid being buried as more and more sand

spilled into the hole. The Doctor struggled to keep his feet clear of the

sandslide, jumping and stepping on top of the cascade as it poured

into

the hole. Grinning, he ran at the wall again and again, caving it in with his

umbrella until, gasping with exhaustion and bathed in sweat he was able

to walk up the ramp of loose sand he had dragged down and out of the

hole. He shook the umbrella off, and closed it.

The Doctor stood for a moment, the sun lowering in the sky behind

him, tapping the umbrella's question-mark handle against his chin,

thinking. Think like the enemy, that was the old adage. Put yourself in

their shoes. Which also meant think like their prey in this case. The

hydrovore would be desperately thirsty. Maddeningly so. 'Think!' the

Doctor chided himself. There was a limit to how long the water-eater

could survive in the intense heat without feeding — so it would seek

shade, preserving what little reserves it had stored.

What did he know about the Kortani? Precious little was the irritating

truth. judging by the black holes pocking the face of the mountain they

were subterranean. What else? A few scratchings on the wall, and the

rants of the leader driven by the hive mind.

A hive mind! The Doctor latched onto the thought excitedly: getting a

warning to one would be the same as reaching all of them... but they

wouldn't listen. It wasn't in their nature. If he was going to save them he

needed to do something. But what?

The Doctor rapped the red handle off the side of his head in frustration.

The hydrovore came to eat...

But there couldn't be enough indigenous life to sate its appetite. The cliff face paintings...

Something about them poked away at his subconscious, refusing to be ignored.

Take them at face value, he muttered to himself, turning and turning again. *What are they? Paintings of a spacecraft. That's pretty obvious, so more: they are paintings of the same spacecraft that is here now but they are older, which means it can't possibly be the same ship, ergo it becomes a pretty huge coincidence... Much more likely, the hydrovore has been here before! Yes!* The Doctor grinned fiercely. *Of course! That's it! It's no random visit! The creature has been scouting this planet for years. Centuries even. So in those paintings, the ship in the sky was the threat. They recorded it for their descendants, a warning to look to the skies. Brilliant. Now think, why the space hulk, a slow ship over a fast one? Because it can carry things. Masses of cargo space. And why would the hydrovore need a ship capable of such storage?* He paused a beat, understanding. *It would depend on where it was travelling, wouldn't it? So then what is special about here? A desert planet. And why a desert planet when they are best suited to water worlds? Think, man, think!*

And then it hit him. 'Why masquerade as a preacher? Why obsess about the word?' The only answer that made sense to the Doctor, with the long- range space hulk, the remembered terror from the skies, and all the rest. *Because in the beginning there was the word, and the word was — how in the world could it be so stupid? Don't make a world, change a world.* All of those other visits, scouting missions, laying the foundation.

He remembered the dampness of the relatively high water table. How many centuries of planning had gone into this coup?

'Well it's not going to happen,' the Doctor stated flatly.

He knew what he had to do.

He ran back towards the TARDIS, his feet sinking in the sand as he struggled to match his pace with the urgency driving him. He promised himself he would not look as he passed the shadowed lee where he had found the hollowed-out exoskeletons of the dead Kortani — but he could not help himself. He ran harder, pumping his arms and legs furiously.

There was a dimensional shield around the Akthon shuttle that prevented the Doctor from rematerilising within the hulk's massive bulkhead.

He thumbed the console in frustration.

The hydrovore had obviously taken measures to protect his ship —

meaning the Doctor wouldn't be able to walk in. But what had it done?

The atmospheric reader displayed zero percent precipitation.

He rooted around beneath the console but couldn't find what he was looking for. Another five minutes were wasted tearing various rooms of the TARDIS apart amid mutters of, 'Think, think, think!'

He found what he was looking for in the cloister: a small monocle sat beside an old copy of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, containing one of the original serialised episodes of *Barnaby Rudge*. He pocketed it, along with his sonic screwdriver. *That ought to cover most eventualities. Now let's just hope it doesn't have some kind of meson recognition system blocking the door, shall we?*

The short hop left the TARDIS less than twenty feet from the grounded space hulk. The Doctor hurried up the tongue-like ramp and studied the doorway, looking for hidden cameras or other security devices. There was a small alphanumeric keypad and above it what looked like a retinal scanner.

Grinning, the Doctor placed the monocle over his right eye and leaned in close to the optical reader, trying not to squint as the Akthon misread his retinal print, believing it to be that of the hydrovore. He clucked his tongue impatiently. The monocle reflected the last image the retinal scanner had received back at it and the huge doors folded back on themselves in a series of resounding clunks. It was a simple enough

trick, but it worked like a charm.

He wandered into the belly of the beast.

The first thing he noticed, almost immediately, was the extreme cold

and the high level of moisture in the air.

The ship was old — and every inch of its core betrayed the fact. The

metal struts had oxidised redly giving the corridors an unnerving blood-

like quality. The Doctor's footsteps echoed hollowly, chasing through the

empty spaces. He moved cautiously deeper and deeper into the

bulkhead until he found what he was looking for, the door into the cargo

bay. It was an airlock-style contraption, impossibly heavy. The Doctor

struggled with the wheel-handle, forcing it open, and threw the door

back.

He stepped through into another world — or the beginnings of one.

* * *

The white preacher stood over the Kortani warrior Orwen Kleth, his

fingers splayed as he pressed his open palm down upon the hard shell of

the screaming creature.

'This is how the world ends, warrior. And this is how it begins again.

With a word. And that word is pain.'

Kleth writhed, desperate to break the preacher's touch.

He felt the soft stuff of his insides beginning to boil.

Will you beg for mercy now, Orwen Kleth?'

The shrieks of the hive mind filled his head as he opened himself up to the pain, sharing the agony with his family.

Omen Kleth is weak.

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Kleth will die.

We will all die, Kleth's mind shrieked as the water in his bowel steamed and his blood seared through his veins.

'Such sweet suffering,' the white preacher crooned, inhaling the Kortani's pain as completely as he absorbed the water of its flesh.

The cargo hold contained everything the hydrovore needed to drown the desert sands and raise a water world — atmospheric impactors, thermal agitators, macrobial life waiting to be transplanted into the new

ecology. Everything necessary to create an unconstrained aquatic biosphere.

The Doctor didn't want to drown the planet, all he wanted to do was make it rain.

He tore through the crates, pushing them aside one after the other. There had to be something here he could use.

Finally, he found it. An atmospheric flare, a rainmaker by any other name.

There was a flare gun in the cannister beside it.

The Doctor looked at his old silver watch. He had no idea how long he had. He broke the seal on the cannister, loaded the flare gun with

the

rainmaker and took it back out into the heat of the setting sun. He looked

at the gun in his hand, then up at the cloudless sky, and fired.

A brilliant orange tail scudded high into the sky, out-climbing any

normal flare as it caught thermals and rose, showering its biochemical

payload so that it could be spread on the wind.

The reaction was almost immediate as thermal pressures collided and

a fine white mist began to gather.

'Come on, come on,' the Doctor urged the sky.

And the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

They gave way to a storm.

The storm to a deluge.

Rain drove into the sand, bouncing high. Thunder cracked and

rumbled. Erratic lightning sparked and arced across the firmament.

The white preacher moved away from the husk of Orwen Kleth, his

body singing as the rain hit, soaking into his flesh. He pulled off his torn

shirt and stepped out of his trousers and stood there naked in the storm,

gorging himself on the water as it came down. He threw back his head,

drinking it in, spread his arms wide and span in circles, drunk on the stuff

of the heavens. And still it rained. He could not stop feeding.

His pores wept water, his flesh bloating, straining to the extreme to

consume more and more of the deluge.

He fell to his knees beside the hollowed-out exoskeleton of his victim

and looked up to see the funny looking man with his colourful umbrella

slipping and sliding down the nearest dune. He could barely see him

through the rain.

The hydrovore looked down at its hands as they swelled, becoming

unrecognisable as more and more water was absorbed into the fat

fingers until they resembled nothing more than plates of saturated meat.

He tried to raise his head but his neck had swollen so much he couldn't.

And still, like an addict, he could not stop absorbing the water.

His body was changing, reverting to its natural form.

The preacher knew then that he would die here, on this desert floor,

the rain pouring down on his bloated corpse. There was no way he could

hope to survive if his will lost its hold on his shape. He wasn't ready. The

planet wasn't ready. It was too soon. An age of careful planning undone

by a desert storm.

The man's shadow loomed over him.

'Leave this place. It isn't your world to reconstruct. You aren't a god to

these creatures. Leave them now and never come back. Do that and you

might live.'

The hydrovore tried to speak but its tongue had bloated to the point that it filled his mouth and throat.

'Nod if you understand me.'

The hydrovore tried to nod, its huge head rolling on its enormous neck.

'Good enough.'

The Doctor opened his umbrella, making sure the suffering hydrovore was shielded from the worst of the storm.

He stood over the creature while it struggled to maintain a grip on its physiology. It had consumed so much water its flesh had swollen to almost three times its previous size. Much more and the thing would rupture and the leviathan would spill out and die on the sands, no matter how much rain came down. It was a beast of the seas.

'Come with me,' the Doctor said, almost tenderly. He didn't look at the remains of Orwen Kleth. 'There has been enough death today.'

And slowly, he led the lumbering hydrovore back towards its ship.

'Go home. Swim in your native seas.'

'But why protect these vile creatures? They are monsters.' The hydrovore coughed up lungfuls of water. The Doctor steadied the creature. 'Time and again they have had the chance to change... but they refuse to.'

'Who are you to say they need to change?' the Doctor said, even

though he knew in his hearts that one day he would face the Kortani again, and this time they would be the aggressors. It was a pyrrhic victory. One day conquest would go beyond the sands and into the stars as new leaders rose up from the hive mind to replace Orwen Kleth and in their ambitions sought to bend other, weaker species to their will. It was nature at its most primal, scattering the seed to ensure survival of the species. Until then they deserved protection just as much as any other because tomorrow was another day. 'Now go before I change my mind. Consider this my mercy. This species is under my protection. I am giving you your life now; return here and I will take it away from you. And

believe me, I am true to my word.'

The Doctor lowered his umbrella, allowing the rain to hit the hydrovore's bare skin. The creature howled its pain and raced up the metallic tongue into the Akthon.

He stood there, in the rain, long after the shuttle had gone, tears of rain falling down his upturned face. It wouldn't last. That was the nature of the victory he had won, but it didn't actually matter. Nature would reassert itself. The balance would be found. And perhaps the Kortani would never reach for the stars...

Shivering, knowing it was a lie, he walked back towards the TARDIS,

savouring the feel of the rain on his face as he twirled the umbrella between his fingers.

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Rock Star

Robert T Jeschonek

An adventure of the Third Doctor, with Jo

When the groundquake started, the Doctor thought it was just more of the super-amplified bass line that the musicians had been pounding out on stage. That was why, instead of leaping into action, all he did was screw the earplugs deeper into his ears.

Jo Grant, in fact, caught on to the problem before the Doctor. Slim, pretty Jo had been dancing since the start of the concert, hopping around in her tie-dyed T-shirt and blue jeans, tossing her wavy blonde hair. When the ground started shaking, Jo stopped dancing for the first time in hours.

'Doctor!' Jo tugged on the frilly sleeve of the Doctor's shirt. 'It's a quake!'

‘For the hundredth time,' said the Doctor, ' *no*, I do not wish to *dance*.'

Seconds later, he understood what she was trying to tell him. That was when the musicians stopped playing and ran off the stage... and the amphitheatre kept rumbling.

The Doctor felt something trickling into his puff of feathery silver hair.

Looking up, he saw streams of dust falling from the cornice of a teetering

stone column.

Suddenly, Jo yanked the plug from the Doctor's right ear and shouted

at him. 'I said it's a *quake*! We've got to move!'

The Doctor heard the crowd screaming in terror as he popped the

plug out of his other ear. Looking around, he saw the concert-goers — a

multitude of alien species gathered on the planet Rishik for its annual

music festival, Beatfest — fleeing in all directions.

Mind and body shooting to full alertness, the Doctor leapt from the

stone bench to his feet. The danger thrilled him far more than the concert

had.

Jo tugged his sleeve again and took off, sprinting along the riser.

'Come on!'

The Doctor quickly saw what she was heading for — a cluster of

Cephalith children, heads like orange octopi, bodies like knobby red

spinning- jennies, huddled under a cracked pillar that was about to

collapse.

Burgundy velvet opera cape flapping behind him, the Doctor charged

after Jo. The shaking stone riser underfoot made it hard to run; as the

quake grew stronger, he stumbled and lagged behind.

The top half of the pillar teetered as Jo reached the children. Shouting

and waving, she drove them from the pillar's path, then saw that she'd

missed one and ran back for it.

The amphitheatre chose that moment to begin to split apart. With a sound like thunder, the great stone bowl cracked, opening a crevice that shot from the stage to the upper tiers of seating in a heartbeat.

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It was heading straight for Jo.

Arms and legs pumping, the Doctor bolted across the riser. Without missing a step, he scooped up Jo and the child, barely dodging the crevice as it leapt open behind him.

As the Doctor kept running, he heard an explosive crash. He stopped at the cluster of Cephalith children and turned to see that the pillar had fallen into the crevice.

'Two for one that time,' he said, lowering Jo to her feet.

'Thanks for the lift,' said Jo. The little Cephalith squirmed and squealed in her arms, fluttering its orange tentacles over her rainbow-coloured T-shirt.

It was then that a familiar voice called out from nearby. 'Doc! This way!' Turning, the Doctor saw his old friend and host, Anderian Gosha, gliding towards him on a big, glowing hover-disk.

Anderian lowered the disk and reached out with his twelve hands.

'Now boarding! Mind the gap!' A native of Rishik — minister of music for half the world, actually — he had the characteristic disconnected body of

a Rishiki, with all his parts detached from one another and floating freely,

bobbing around his long, corkscrewing torso. His skin had the tawny,

metallic grain of tiger's-eye agate. A cloud of shaggy brown hair floated

over his kidney-shaped head, and a bushy beard drifted in the vicinity of

his jaw.

The Doctor handed up one of the Cephalith children. 'Thank you,

minister,' he said, though he'd known Anderian for many years and rarely

called him by his title. 'What can you tell us about the quake?'

Anderian used his multiple hands to hoist up four children at once.

'Not much yet. It caught us by surprise.'

Jo gave him the little Cephalith she'd been holding. 'There was no

warning?'

‘No,' said Anderian. 'We don't have detection equipment for this kind

of event. This region hasn't had a lot of geologic instability.'

'Not a lot?' said the Doctor.

'None, actually.' Anderian boosted the Doctor and Jo up onto the disk.

'This is the first quake in recorded history, Doc. It's the worst crisis ever

to befall the Rishiki Beatfest.'

'What a shame,' said Jo. 'Having to end early because of the quake.'

'Oh, it's not ending early,' said Anderian. 'No way.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Do you mean to say you're planning to continue

this year's Beatfest? How is that even possible?'

'We have an alternative site,' said Anderian. 'Huge fields outside the city.'

'A quake can split open a field as easily as an amphitheatre,' said the Doctor. 'Do you really think this is wise, old friend?'

'We've never cut a Beatfest short, and we won't start this year.' Anderian's head spun all the way around, though his bushy hair and beard didn't budge. 'Besides, we've got a major headliner, and he's on last.'

'He'd better be big, for you to jeopardise all these lives,' said the Doctor.

'He's big, all right.' Anderian grinned. 'Maybe you've heard of him. His name is Genus Fry.'

When Genus Fry opened his eyes, he saw two great stone faces gazing down, one on either side of him.

Blockheads. That was what he called them. They looked like they'd been carved from black flint, with great, gleaming foreheads and features like metal ingots.

And they were alive.

'Hello there.' Genus grinned and waggled the disconnected fingers of three of his twelve hands. 'I wasn't expecting two masseurs this morning.'

One of the Blockheads spoke, his ingot lips grinding as they moved.

'You... have... done... well. The... Tun... are... pleased.'

The Tun. That was what the Blockheads called themselves. They tended to move slowly and not say much, but the minds behind those pulsing red eyes were enormous.

Those minds were responsible for the incredible machine in which Genus lay... the machine he'd used to spin miracles on a grand scale.

'Well, that was a serious head rush, I must say.' As Genus sat up, the warm, golden gel of the link cradle clung to his back and arms. 'Reminded me of the Galaxy Jam, when I played through ten million biosynthetic avatars for a trillion fans on a billion worlds.'

'The... quake... struck... the... intended... target,' said one of the Tun. He had a streak of pale grey ore across his forehead, and his name was Oke. 'Casualties... were... minimal.'

The grin faded from Genus' blue-agate face. In the run-up to this project, he hadn't thought much about casualties. 'How many then?'

'Within... acceptable... limits,' said Oke. 'Regrettable... but... necessary.'

Genus frowned. One of his three goatees — the purple one this time — rotated into place to hover over his chin. 'But I thought I'd nailed it,' he said. 'I thought I'd tuned it so no one would die.'

'Impossible,' said the other Tun, whose name was Erm. Erm's stony body had lumps of clear, glittering crystal scattered over its surface. 'Collateral... damage... is... unavoidable... when... forces... of .. this... magnitude... are... deployed.'

Genus shook his head. 'I didn't sign on to kill my fans.'

'For... the... greater... good,' said Erm. 'Remember?'

Genus sighed and slumped.

He's got me there.

The greater good was exactly why he'd signed on with the Blockheads in the first place. Plus another reason, of course.

I want to save myself in the bargain.

'Right,' said Genus. 'Greater good.'

'Now.' Oke placed one stony hand on Genus's chest and pressed him

backwards. 'Do... it... again.'

Genus could not resist the heavy pressure. His body sank back into the warm, tingling gel of the cradle. White-hot sparks flared in three places — his belly, his heart, his brain.

And just like before, the music rushed through him.

Just as the second quake started, the door to the TARDIS crashed open, and the Doctor hurtled inside.

He barrelled across the deck, which was shaking and tilting, and caught himself on the control console. A second later, Anderian lunged

up beside him and a second after that, Jo collided with both of them.

'This quake feels stronger than the first!' said Anderian. 'What could be causing them, Doc?'

'That's what we're here to find out.' The Doctor punched buttons and

flipped switches on the console. 'Your people might not have the equipment to analyse quakes, but the TARDIS has its very own seismographic suite.'

'We got here just in time then, didn't we?' said Jo.

The Doctor smacked the side of a monitor with his gloved hand, stopping the image on the screen from rippling. 'No better time indeed, Jo. This quake seems to be at its peak.'

'You mean it won't get any worse?' said Anderian.

'Let's have a look, shall we?' The Doctor twisted a knob, then made his way past Jo to another panel, gripping the console to steady himself against the quake as he went. He adjusted several dials, typed instructions on a keyboard... and a holographic grid flickered to life in midair in front of him. A jagged red line climbed the pale green cross-hatching of the grid, portraying the quake's rising intensity. 'I'm sorry to say it's getting worse by the moment.'

Anderian's face was grim. His body parts remained disconnected as always but clung more closely together the way they did when he was worried. 'How far is it reaching?'

The Doctor braced himself against a particularly strong tremor, then played the controls some more. The holographic display changed from a graph to a map of the world. Red concentric circles overlaid on a green land mass indicated the zone of the quake's current influence.

'The capital, the coast and the farm belt are all affected.' The Doctor tweaked a knob and the image zoomed in on the centremost circle. 'I'm having some difficulty locating the epicentre, though. Wait.' He made another adjustment and leaned closer to squint at the map. 'That can't be right.'

Jo worked her way around the console to join him. 'What, Doctor?'

'The epicentre,' said the Doctor. 'It seems to be moving.'

'How can that be possible?' said Jo.

The Doctor fiddled with more controls, conjuring numbers and diagrams on a screen.

Incredible.

He double-checked his findings before he spoke. 'The oscillation of the seismic waves shows a unique pattern. Fluctuating levels of intensity.

Of pitch.'

'What does it mean, Doc?' said Anderian.

'The pattern's too regular to occur naturally.' Another pulse of the quake struck, and the holographic display went dark. 'It's as if the seismic activity's being guided somehow.'

'Guided?' said Jo.

'By an intelligence,' said the Doctor. 'I believe these quakes are being generated artificially and directed by some form of sentient life.'

'Enough.' Genus snapped his eyes open and sat up in the cradle, breaking the link and stopping the quakes. 'That's it for now.'

Oke and Erm were watching readouts on the wall of screens across the room. Before they could trundle over to him, Genus swung his legs over the side of the cradle and dropped his bare feet to the floor.

'Not... done,' said Oke.

'Resume... the... uplink,' said Erm.

Genus raised all twelve hands in front of him at once. 'Whoa, kids. Time for that later.'

Oke and Erm continued to stomp towards him.

' *Resume.* ' The Blockheads rarely showed much emotion, but Oke sounded downright angry. 'Do your... *job*.'

'Hey!' Genus jabbed twelve index fingers in Oke's direction. 'Did we or did we not take out another target?'

'We... did,' said Erm.

Oke's metal ingot eyebrows raised and lowered. 'But... your... job...'

'...is entertaining fans,' said Genus. 'Not killing them.' His hands played multiple non-existent instruments all at once — drums, a keyboard, a horn, a guitar — and he let loose a stream of improvised musical sounds.

His hands kept pretend-playing as he scooted towards the door. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go rehearse for the big show.'

You... see... the... future,' said Oke. There... be... a... show?'

Genus wondered the same thing.

Had the quakes done the trick? Maybe two were enough, and he wouldn't have to make any more. Wouldn't have to kill any more innocents.

Genus closed his eyes and followed his future-sight to the same place it always took him — ten years forward.

His shoulders slumped. He saw the same thing as always.

Genus opened his eyes and mustered a smile. 'Time to rehearse, guys. Duty calls.'

'And... then?' said Oke.

Genus clenched his gut and kept the smile firmly in place. He rotated the purple goatee away from his chin and replaced it with the bright green one. 'We'll shake it up more than ever.'

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Just as the Doctor set foot out of the TARDIS, a beam of yellow energy flashed past the doorway. Anderian whipped out a handgun and fired bolts of red energy in reply.

'Get back!' Anderian's head spun one way, then the other, as he sized up his shots. 'It's an ambush!'

The Doctor shut the TARDIS door before Jo — who was a few steps behind him — could emerge in harm's way. Then, crouching, he scanned the surrounding space. The TARDIS was parked in the basement of the Eastern Rishiki Ministry of Music, crowded all around with stacked

storage containers of all sizes and colours — plenty of cover for hiding snipers.

'How many are there?' said the Doctor.

'One, I think,' said Anderian. A blast of yellow energy flashed in from one side, scorching the floor in front of the TARDIS. Anderian followed the blast with one of his own, knocking over a stack of multicoloured barrels.

The Doctor realised that the barrels provided fresh cover between the TARDIS and the stacks of storage containers. 'Cover me,' he told Anderian, touching him on the back.

Before Anderian could protest, the Doctor got down on his hands and knees and scuttled along behind the toppled barrels. Meanwhile, Anderian kept up the gunfight, doubling his fire to draw the enemy's attention.

At the end of the line of barrels, the Doctor slipped behind a big, blue crate and got to his feet. From where he stood, he could see the shooter, a woman, wedged in a narrow gap between stacks of bins not twenty feet away.

As the shooting continued, the Doctor eased around the bins, coming up on the shooter from behind. When he was at arm's length from his target, the Doctor flipped his velvet cape back over his shoulders, giving his arms full mobility.

Then, it was time for his martial arts specialty: Venusian aikido.

The Doctor lunged. The shooter made a last-ditch effort to swing her rifle around and blow him away... but the Doctor applied a fierce chop to the shooter's forearm and swept the weapon from her grip.

One more chop, this time to the side of the neck, and the shooter went down.

The Doctor, Anderian, and Jo took the shooter to Anderian's office, upstairs in the Ministry of Music building, to interrogate her.

As the Doctor bound the shooter to a chair, Anderian paced back and forth in front of her, wild eyes glittering with rage.

'How could you?' Anderian stopped pacing and loomed over the shooter in the chair. 'I trusted you, Barma.'

The Doctor frowned and stepped between them. 'You know her, Anderian?'

'Not as well as I thought,' said Anderian. 'Meet Barma Buray. My chief of security.'

The Doctor glanced at Barma, and she shrugged. Like Anderian, she had the corkscrewed torso and twelve disconnected hands of a Rishik native. Her agate-grained skin was pale olive in colour, and her long, gleaming hair was jet black.

'A mole, eh?' said the Doctor.

'Working for the West, I'm sure.' Anderian shook his head. 'A double-crossing traitor.'

Barma snorted. 'As if you don't have moles of your own in the West.'

'So the music wars continue.' The Doctor sighed. 'Some things never change.'

'Music wars?' Jo sounded irritated, and the Doctor knew why. She'd already given him a piece of her mind for shutting her in the TARDIS during the gunfight.

'Music is everything on Rishik,' said the Doctor. 'The culture, the government, and the economy are all rooted in it. All wealth and power is derived from the music industry... and where there's wealth and power...'

'...there are wars,' said Anderian. 'Musicians, companies and nations will do anything to get to the top and stay there.'

'They'll kill to break up a band or ruin a tour,' said the Doctor. 'They'll even kill to build a reputation and obtain publicity.'

'You Westerners saw your chance, didn't you?' said Anderian. 'With our region destabilised by the quakes, you thought you could just swoop in and take over!'

'You're wrong,' said Barma. 'We want to stop the quakes. They've struck the West, too!'

'You lie!' said Anderian. 'We know the quakes were artificially generated. Who else would trigger them?'

At that moment, the Doctor dropped down beside them. 'Neither of you, apparently.'

Anderian and Barma stared at him.

The Doctor tugged a folded sheet of paper from his maroon satin waistcoat and spread it out to show them. The image on the sheet was a map, with multiple sets of red concentric circles superimposed over a green land mass. 'Here's a little something the TARDIS printed up,' said the Doctor. 'It shows the relative positions of the roving epicentres of the quakes so far.

'Now look here.' The Doctor tapped a finger on a gap between the sets of circles. 'A zone of stability. What does that suggest to you?'

Jo tucked her blonde hair behind her ears and leaned down for a closer look at the map. ‘That whoever's generating the quakes is based there.' 'Very good, Jo,' said the Doctor.

‘This can't be, Doc.' Anderian snatched the map from the Doctor's hand and examined it closely. ‘The stable zone. I know exactly where that is.' ‘Tell us,' said Jo.

'It's the estate of Genus Fry,' said Anderian. ‘My festival headliner.'

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This is all I've ever really wanted.

That thought flashed in Genus Fry's mind as he rehearsed for the show, playing multiple musical instruments in perfect harmony and syncopation.

To create something new and beautiful.

The fingers of four of his hands danced over the fifty-stringed spiral

lajango, plucking a wild, weaving melody of intricate, twinkling notes. Two hands played the keys of the ten-belled alto *davimi* horn, turning his

breath into crystal-bright tones of swirling grace. The other six hands pounded out rhythms on a jumble of exotic drums and cymbals, everything from the deep bass *romax* to the tinny *contrilliad.*

Why can't I always be this happy?

Unlike many Rishiki, Genus was a natural-born musician. Some said he was the greatest in the world, and Genus knew that wasn't far from the truth.

Why can't I just do what I love and forget about this whole ugly Tun business?

The answer was sickeningly clear, of course: because ten years ago tomorrow, he'd had the vision that had ruined his life.

Genus had always had the ability to see ten years into the future. It had given him a great advantage in his career in the music industry, enabling him to anticipate trends and stay ahead of his rivals.

One day, though, he'd looked ten years ahead, and he'd seen something new. Something terrifying.

Dirt and darkness. Genus had seen nothing but dirt and darkness all around.

It looked just like what he thought he might see if he were buried in the ground.

Every vision of the future that he'd glimpsed since then had been the same. Genus was doomed to darkness for as far into the future as he

could see.

And it would start for him tomorrow. Tomorrow, on the tenth anniversary of his first vision of the coming of darkness.

Unless the Tun, who had shown up six months ago, managed to help him change his fate.

Just then, as if on cue, the voice of one of the Tun boomed over the music in the rehearsal studio. Genus stopped jamming and turned to see

Oke towering on the other side of the studio doorway.

‘Erm... and... I... are... going... below,' said Oke.

'Why's that?' said Genus. ‘Time for more quakes?'

Oke's metal ingot brows cranked downward in an expression like a human frown. 'You... have... company.'

‘Something's going on here,' whispered Jo. 'I've got a feeling.'

She and the Doctor stood in the enormous entryway of Genus Fry's mansion, waiting for the Rishiki butler to return and usher them further

inside. Anderian walked the perimeter of the big round room, examining

the exotic-looking musical instruments on the walls.

'All right, gather round.' The Doctor waved for Anderian to join him and Jo. 'Observations, anyone?'

'Interesting business down below.' Anderian slipped a palm-sized silver disk from the pocket of his jacket. He tapped it with a fingertip,

and

a holographic diagram of the mansion flickered to life in mid-air. He tapped the disk again, and a network of criss-crossing passageways appeared beneath the house. ‘Some kind of shafts and tunnels underground.'

Anderian tapped the disk once more, and a rippling rank of waves flowed through the underground image. 'High-intensity energy fluctuations down there, too. Undetectable from a distance, but dead obvious now we're right on top of them.'

‘We must get down there,' said the Doctor. ‘I've no doubt we'll find what we're looking for.'

Suddenly, another voice erupted in the entryway. ‘Who let you in here?' Anderian flicked off and pocketed the disk, and everyone turned

towards the voice.

‘Genus!' Anderian spread his arms and grinned. ‘We're here for the party!'

Laughing, Genus grabbed an instrument from the wall and hurled it across the room. ‘You remember how to handle one of these, don't you?'

Anderian caught the instrument and twirled it in his hand. It looked like some kind of twisted black flute, long as an arm and flocked with fine, silver cilia.

‘Let's see.' Anderian raised the flute to his lips and played a high, sweet tune that filled the room. His shaggy hair and bushy beard danced

around his face as he played, six hands fluttering over the finger-holes along the winding length of the instrument.

'Nope,' he said, lowering the flute when he was done. 'I guess I don't.'

Genus roared with laughter. 'Then follow me! All of you!' Spinning, he sprinted from the room. 'I'll teach you a thing or two!'

Anderian and Genus played like wildmen in the big, gleaming rehearsal studio. Lights flashed on the ceiling, walls, and floor as they ripped through a screaming duet — Anderian playing the twisted black flute, Genus attacking the fifty-stringed *lajango*.

The Doctor and Jo stood off to one side. Jo bobbed her head and swayed, but the Doctor had heard enough. 'We've got to get underground,' he said to Jo. 'Follow my lead.'

With that, the Doctor strolled over to the performance area and reached for a stringed instrument that was as tall as he was... something like an Earth upright bass but with a body like a multi-pointed starburst.

Grinning, the Doctor plucked at the strings in a random sequence, breaking the perfect flow of the duet with a deep, jarring rumble.

Anderian and Genus turned to look, smiling and shaking their heads.

The Doctor stepped up his performance, playing faster and leaning forward... and then he fell.

He made himself fall, actually, pretending to lean too far and lose his

balance. He held on to the big instrument, bringing it down on top of him

with a loud, discordant *bong* when he hit the floor.

Immediately, Anderian and Genus stopped playing and ran to the Doctor. Genus lifted the stringed instrument off him and Anderian reached for his arm.

Jo joined them, taking the Doctor's other arm. 'Oh, Doctor,' she said. 'Are you all right?'

'Of course I am, Jo.' With Anderian and Jo on either arm, the Doctor got to his feet. When they let go of him, he smiled and brushed off his smoking jacket.

Then, suddenly, he winced and cringed as if suffering great pain. 'Correction.' The Doctor gasped and stumbled, and Jo rushed to throw her arm around his shoulders. 'You wouldn't happen to have an infirmary, would you?'

'You're on the estate of one of the richest musicians in the world,' said Genus, moving to lend his support. 'Of course I have an infirmary. I'll lead

you there myself.'

The Doctor waved him off. 'Certainly not. The rest of you have business to attend to. Jo and I will find the way just fine.'

'I'll summon the butler,' said Genus.

'I won't have it,' said the Doctor. 'Just tell us the directions, and we'll try not to fall down a rabbit hole.'

As soon as the Doctor was around the corner, he stopped limping

and shrugged Jo's arm from around his shoulder.

'Let's have the map,' said the Doctor, and Jo handed him the silver

disk that Anderian had given her. When the Doctor tapped the disk with a

fingertip, a holographic diagram of the mansion — above ground and

underground — sprang to life over the palm of his glove.

Jo crowded beside him, staring at the diagram. 'Where are we?'

The Doctor raised his hand to eye-level and turned it, moving the

diagram. 'Not far from a rabbit hole, as luck would have it. Next stop,

Wonderland.'

Jo grinned and cuffed his arm. She seemed to have gotten over being

stuck in the TARDIS during the gunfight. 'Every day's Wonderland with

you, Doctor.'

After the Doctor and Jo had left the rehearsal studio, Genus picked

up his *lajango* and strummed it casually, strolling around the room.

In spite of the pressure of time bearing down on him, with the doom

that the next day could bring, he felt at ease. Anderian had been his

friend for many years. Genus was glad he'd stopped by for an impromptu

visit and an old-fashioned jam.

'I can't tell you how great it is to see you, old friend.' Genus sang the

words to match a tune he lightly plucked on the *lajango*.

Anderian smiled and nodded. 'Same here. I wish we could do this

more often.'

'So look.' Genus clapped Anderian on the back. 'What brings you here, old buddy?'

'I wanted to let you know that the show's still on,' said Anderian, 'even after the quakes.'

Genus smiled. 'But you didn't have to run all the way out here, you know. You could've just called.'

Tut you're my headliner,' said Anderian. 'Besides which, I'm your escort.'

'Escort?' Genus dropped his hand from Anderian's back. The purple goatee rotated over his chin, pushing away the red-and-white striped one.

'Through the quake zone,' said Anderian. 'There's a lot of damage out there.'

Genus cleared his throat. 'That's very kind, but...'

Suddenly, he saw a red light blinking above the door. It was a signal that could mean only one thing.

The relaxing interlude was over. The Tun were coming for him.

'An escort really isn't necessary.' Genus put down his *lajango* and headed for the door. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I have some business to attend to.

The staff will show you out.'

Anderian stepped forward. 'Why not come with me? What can it hurt?'

Genus opened the door and stopped. Anderian had his answer.

On the other side of the doorway, Oke and Erm loomed, enormous and implacable as stone statues.

Genus turned. 'You,' he said to Anderian, voice full of regret. 'That's what it can hurt.'

'What *are* they?' whispered Jo as the massive stone figures lumbered past the side tunnel in which she and the Doctor hid.

'This species is new to me,' said the Doctor. 'And certainly not native to Rishik.'

The rock men turned a corner with a sound like grinding granite. Jo peered out of the hiding place after them. 'An invasion force?'

'Only one way to find out.' The Doctor eased out of the side tunnel and turned down the main passage. 'Let's see where those two came from.'

As the Doctor and Jo continued along the passage, a brighter glow from up ahead lit the way. It was a good sign; since leaving the rehearsal studio, the Doctor and Jo had found nothing but dimly lit stone walls in the catacombs under Genus Fry's house.

The Doctor slowed as he approached the light. Turning to Jo, he put a finger to his lips, signalling for quiet, then edged along the wall to the end of the tunnel.

Carefully, the Doctor peeked around the corner into a large chamber.

Hi-tech equipment gleamed under bright lights... and no one seemed to

be keeping it company.

'All clear, I think.' The Doctor nodded to Jo and entered the chamber.

'Now what have we here?'

Jo looked at a series of monitor screens on the wall, each displaying

a different map or graph or video clip related to the quakes. 'I think we've

come to the right place, Doctor.'

'This is amazing, Jo.' The Doctor strolled along a bank of controls,

admiring the design. The knobs and buttons and joysticks looked bulky

and crude, built for the huge, clumsy hands of the rock men... but the

simple design disguised a multitude of advanced functions. 'Technology

fit for our stony friends.'

'What's this, Doctor?' Jo ran her fingers along the edge of a clear,

oval cradle the length of a tall man. The cradle rested at waist-level on a

platform of rough black stone, and it was filled with some kind of golden

gel.

The Doctor walked to the other side of the cradle and stared down at

the gel. Fine, glittering flecks and tiny, dark particles were suspended

within it.

'Some kind of mineral-based matrix.' The Doctor dipped a finger into

the gel and brought it up for a closer look. The gel instantly tightened on

his fingertip, and a light static charge tingled his flesh.

Electrical impulses chasing after neurons. Signals seeking a connection.

'Why, it's an interface,' said the Doctor. 'Meant to link a biological entity to mechanical instrumentation.'

'What's that have to do with the quakes?' said Jo.

The Doctor pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the gel from his finger. 'Everything, Jo. I believe we've found the control centre for the whole operation.'

'Someone lies in here?' said Jo.

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. Tut notice. You won't fit one of those rock men in here. Which begs the question...'

Just then, the Doctor heard voices and shuffling footsteps from the tunnel. Without another word, he waved for Jo to follow him and ducked into a nook in the rough stone wall.

'I don't understand,' said Anderian as the Tun herded him into the lab with Genus. 'What's this all about?'

Instead of answering him, Genus turned to Oke and Erm. 'He doesn't need to be here.' He gestured at Anderian. 'Please, just send him away.'

'He... knows... what... we... have... done,' said Oke. 'Why... else... would... he... have... come... here?'

If... we... release... him,' said Erm, 'he... try... to... stop... us.' He took a step forward, pressing Genus towards the link cradle.

'Wait,' said Genus. 'There isn't enough time for him to stop us, is

there?

That's why you dragged me down here ahead of schedule, right?'

'Nom more... talk.' Erm swung one great, stony paw and scooped up

Genus. 'Now... get... to... work.'

Genus tried to scramble free, and Erm dumped him in the cradle. As

soon as Genus hit the gel, his body tingled with the familiar current of the

activating link.

'What are you doing to him?' Anderian said to Oke.

Oke ignored him and set about operating a panel of controls.

'Multiple... targets... this... time. Here... are... the... co-ordinates.'

'No!' said Genus. 'Set my friend free first!'

Oke fixed him in a fiery red gaze. 'How... long... until... the... end?'

Genus looked at the chronometer on the wall. 'Two hours,' he said. 'Dow

you... have... time... to... waste?' said Oke.

Genus knew the answer.

In two hours, unless he cheated fate, his vision of the future would

become reality. His vision of never-ending dirt and darkness.

Two hours. That was all the time he had to finish his work. To save

his life. And so much more.

'All right.' Genus settled back into the gel of the cradle. 'Let's do it.'

As Genus threw himself into the link, the familiar hot sparks flared in

his brain, heart and belly. A river of data rushed into his mind — target

co-ordinates, recommended routes and intensity levels, geologic

composition and formations.

Closing his eyes, he saw a map appear behind his lids — a vast

network of lines zigzagging over the continent, connecting millions of

points, crossing and recrossing again and again.

He knew this network well, this web of ley lines of geologic power.

Plucking the right lines in just the right way produced a reaction... much

like plucking the strings of a musical instrument.

Which, of course, was one of the reasons that Genus was so good at

it. With his mind, Genus reached into the network and found the first

string that he needed to begin the proper reaction.

Then he plucked it, and the planet trembled.

* * *

From their hiding place in the nook in the wall, the Doctor and Jo

watched as the gel surrounding Genus began to glow and pulse.

'Now we know who links to the interface,' whispered the Doctor.

'Genus Fry himself.'

'Doctor,' Jo pointed to the monitor screens. 'Look what he's doing.'

The Doctor scowled when he saw what was on the screens — one

scene after another of quakes rocking Rishiki towns and cities. Buildings

collapsed into rubble, streets split apart, power lines snapped and water

mains exploded. People ran but could not escape being crushed by falling rubble or swallowed up by gaping fissures.

'This is horrific,' said the Doctor. 'Look at those readings. It's the worst quake yet.'

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'My God,' said Jo. 'Those poor people.'

The Doctor's voice was grim. 'We can't allow it to continue.' 'Tell me what to do,' said Jo. 'Shan stage a diversion?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Stay here. If I fail, it will all be up to you. You must stop this at any cost.'

Jo started to protest, but the Doctor whisked out of the nook before she could say another word.

He drew the sonic screwdriver from his pocket as he ran for the gel interface cradle. When he reached it, he grabbed the rim and rocked it hard to one side.

The gel sloshed and sparked as the Doctor pulled the cradle back and rocked it forward again. Another heave or two, and he thought he might free it from its base and send it crashing to the floor.

At least that was what he thought before the monstrous hand of a rock man clamped down on his arms.

'Dow not... interfere.' The rock man hoisted the Doctor away from the cradle and held him suspended above the floor.

'Doctor!' Anderian rushed forward, but the rock man raised a monolithic hand to keep him at a distance. 'They've triggered another

quake!'

'I've been meaning to talk to you chaps about that,' the Doctor said to the rock man who'd grabbed him, the one with the crystal lumps all over his body. 'There are other ways to get attention, you know.'

'Take... him... to... a... cell... Erm,' said the other rock man, the one with the pale grey streak across his forehead. 'Take... both... of... them,' he said without looking up from the bank of controls he was operating.

'Yes... Oke.' Erm, the rock man who was holding the Doctor, swept up Anderian in his free hand. The Doctor made a note of the surprising swiftness of the stone giant's grab.

'Wait a minute.' The Doctor twisted in Erm's grip. 'Put me down, will you? I've dropped something.'

'No.' With the Doctor in one hand and Anderian in the other, Erm lumbered out of the chamber.

The Doctor continued to twist and look behind him. 'But it's something quite hazardous, I can assure you.'

'No... more... delays,' said Erm.

The Doctor sighed. ‘If you insist. But I won't be held responsible for any damages.'

With that, he allowed himself a private smile. He had indeed dropped something, and he had done it on purpose. In fact, he had switched it on and put it in the one place where it could do the most damage — the

interface cradle where Genus conjured quakes.

He wondered what exactly would happen when his trusty sonic screwdriver started reversing its polarity in there.

Heart hammering, Jo watched from the nook as Erm hauled the Doctor and Anderian away. It was up to her now; that's what the Doctor

had said.

You must stop this at any cost.

Jo knew that she had to act fast, and she had to get it right the first time. With each passing second, more people died screaming in the quake.

Taking a deep breath, she scanned the mass of equipment. What was the quickest way to stop a machine?

Switch it off. Pull the plug. Cut power to the brain.

And where was this machine's brain?

Who was the brain, was more like it.

So now Jo knew what she had to do next. She had to do whatever it took to unplug Genus Fry.

It was like playing a song. A beautiful, terrible song.

As Genus plucked and strummed the lines of power, he felt the music of the trembling world. Each shock and countershock reverberated through the planet's crust, sending out wave after wave of thundering,

intricate music.

Everything that vibrated broadcast a flurry of notes, rising and falling in volume, pitch, timing and timbre. It was the richest symphony that Genus had ever heard or played, breathtaking for all its overwhelming immensity and profusion. He revelled in its endless variations, its luminous, incongruous fragility, the labyrinthine order bubbling within its ferocious chaos.

At the same time, it revolted him. The notes emanated from fracturing landscapes, crumbling walls, shattering glass... screaming, running people. Dying people.

From within the singing, shuddering web, Genus felt a throbbing pain... and at first, assumed it was the ache of his overburdened heart. The stab of his guilty conscience.

As moments passed and the pain sharpened, however, Genus realised that it came from a different source. It radiated from a point outside his body, not within it.

The pain continued to intensify. It gave off heat, like a flame, and throbbed... but not in sync with the pulsing of the gel in the link interface cradle. Instead, the flame throbbed in perfect counterpoint to the pulsing of the gel.

That wasn't all it did. The heat source broadcast its own vibrational signal, its own unique signature of alternating variable tones. It was playing its own song, a song that wove and blended with the

symphony

surging in the cradle... and transformed it.

Subtly at first, the new song altered the broader symphony, changing chord progressions and minor harmonics. Before long, Genus realised that the subtle changes triggered powerful shifts. The fundamental structure of the music of the quake realigned, redirected... reversed.

Genus's eyes snapped open. His heart pounded as he felt control of the quake slipping away from him. As he felt the quake reverse its

course and cascade from all directions towards the centre, towards the source.

Towards him.

Jo raised a heavy metal bar over her head, preparing to swing it down on the gel-filled cradle.

She had been in a state of high alert since leaving her hiding place and sneaking across the room. Her nerves had been on edge with every

step; she'd held her breath the whole way.

It was no wonder her heart almost pounded its way out of her chest when Genus shot up out of the gel and grabbed her wrist.

He shook her arm hard, sending the bar clattering to the floor. 'Listen!'

His eyes were wide as softballs, his voice frantic. 'It's coming!'

Jo heard heavy footsteps approaching. Turning, she saw Oke, the rock man from the control console, marching towards her with arms

extended.

'I can see that!' said Jo. 'Can't you call him off?'

'I wasn't talking about him!' Genus clamped his eyes shut, then wrenched them open again.

Suddenly, he looked into the gel at his side. He shot his free hand down and pulled something out.

Something familiar to Jo.

'This!' said Genus. 'This did it!'

Jo recognised the object he held but didn't say so. It was the Doctor's sonic screwdriver. 'Did what?'

'Turned the quake around!' said Genus. 'Reversed its course!' 'Well,' said Jo. 'Personally, I don't see that as a bad thing.'

'It's a *terrible* thing!' said Genus. 'The quake is coming this way! It's out of control and headed straight for us!'

As he said it, the room began to shake.

Down the corridor from the lab, Erm pulled open the stone slab door to a prison cell. Just then, the rock walls and dirt floor started to tremble.

Dust and debris trickled down from the ceiling, showering the rock giant and the two captives gripped in his massive paw.

Before Erm could toss the Doctor and Anderian into the cell, the trembling grew stronger. Bigger chunks dropped from above, bouncing off Erm and tumbling to the floor.

Then, suddenly, a section of the ceiling collapsed. Erm threw aside the Doctor and Anderian just as the heavy rockfall pinned and buried him.

'That was lucky.' Anderian got up from the tunnel floor and dusted himself off. 'I doubt he'll take long to dig himself out, though.'

'An excellent reason for us to get out of here in a hurry.' The Doctor got up, too, and cupped his ear to the rock wall of the tunnel. He heard

vibrations in the stone, quickly growing louder. 'And I have another excellent reason for you.'

'What's that?' said Anderian.

'We're in the worst possible place to withstand a devastating quake,' said the Doctor.

'But I thought this was a quake-free zone,' said Anderian.

'Well it's becoming the exact opposite,' said the Doctor as he ran off down the tunnel.

'Let go of me,' said Jo. 'If the quake's coming, I need to get the Doctor and the others out of here.'

Genus tightened his hold on her wrist. 'I can't let you leave!'

Oke grabbed Jo's shoulder and tugged her away from the cradle. 'I_ secure... this... intruder.'

'Back off!' said Genus. The bright green goatee shot into place over his chin, replacing the purple one. 'We need her help!'

Without a word, the rock man let go of Jo.

'And I need to get my friends as far away as possible as fast as I can!' said Jo.

'You don't understand,' said Genus. 'I need you to help me turn the quake back on course.'

The floor rumbled under Jo's feet. Adrenaline rushed through her bloodstream, quickening her pulse. 'So it can destroy more cities instead of wrecking your precious mansion? I don't think so!'

'No!' Eyes blazing with intensity, Genus jerked her towards him. 'So we can save the world!'

Jo tried to pull her arm from his grip, with no success. 'Save it then! I'm not stopping you!'

'I can't.' Genus threw away the sonic screwdriver and grabbed Jo's other wrist. 'Now that the interface has been corrupted, I need help.'

'Ask Mount Everest there.' Jo nodded at Oke.

'Won't work! The Tun can't manipulate ley lines!' With a sudden heave, Genus pulled Jo off her feet.

Jo thrashed and kicked as he hauled her up over the edge of the cradle. 'Let go of me!'

'Relax.' Genus wrenched her around and planted her squirming body in the glittering golden gel. 'Close your eyes and open your mind.' He pushed her under the surface and held her there as she struggled. 'Imagine you're playing a musical instrument.'

The first thing the Doctor saw when he charged into the lab was Genus Fry holding Jo under the gel in the cradle.

Her body was limp.

‘Genus!' The Doctor sprinted towards the cradle. 'Stop it, blast you!'

Before the Doctor could reach them, Oke lunged into his path and grabbed him.

'Now interference.' Oke shook the Doctor like a rag doll and tossed him against the wall.

'Stop it, Oke!' said Genus. 'We need them!'

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'Need... them?' said Oke.

The rumbling in the chamber grew louder, and dirt trickled from the stone ceiling. 'Please.' Genus spoke directly to Anderian now. 'I need your help to save the world.'

'You've just killed Jo!' said the Doctor.

'She's interfacing,' said Genus, 'not dead. But she's not enough to help me reverse the quake.'

'Reverse it, huh?' said Anderian. 'It's not so much fun when the quake's headed your way, is it?'

'Listen to me!' said Genus. 'We have less than an hour!'

'Till what?' said the Doctor. 'Till your mansion comes crashing down around you?'

'Till the end of the world!' said Genus. 'What do you think I've been

trying to *prevent*?'

The Doctor stared into Genus's wild eyes, looking for a reason not to trust him. Looking for malice or cunning or insanity.

He found nothing but desperation, sincerity and clarity.

'All right then,' he said. 'Let's hear it.'

'Hear what?' said Genus.

'Your story.' The rumbling intensified, rattling the equipment in the lab.

'But I'd keep it brief, if I were you.'

Something fell and shattered in the lab as Genus began his story.

The rumbling had gotten so loud, he had to raise his voice to be heard.

'For as long as I can remember, I've been able to see the future,' he said. 'Ten years into the future, to be exact. One day, I looked ten years ahead, and all I saw was dirt and darkness.' Genus flinched as something else shattered. 'The day I saw was tomorrow. At first, I thought I'd seen my own death and burial. Then, I met the Tun.'

'We... are... guardians... of .. this... world,' said Oke.

'The Tun showed me evidence of a secret weapons buildup,' said Genus.

'Here.' Oke gestured at a set of screens in front of him. 'Look.'

The Doctor walked over and watched the screens as Oke played controls on the console. Images flickered past quickly, but not too fast for

a Time Lord like the Doctor to process.

Oke's screens flipped from tables of data to maps and graphs. From missile silo surveillance photos to underground bomb test video. From technical drawings of missiles to timelines and battle plans.

'The East and West are racing to launch a nuclear war,' said Genus. 'It's set to begin tomorrow.'

The Doctor turned and locked eyes with Anderian. 'Is this true?'

Anderian frowned. 'There's been an arms race, but I didn't know we'd decided to go to war.'

'I see.' The Doctor turned back to Genus. 'And you believe that the outcome of this war was what you saw in your visions?'

'Yes,' said Genus. 'I'd foreseen more than the end of myself. I'd

foreseen the end of the world.'

'But... we... are... trying... to... change... that,' said Oke.

'The quakes,' said Genus. 'They're specially targeted to neutralize weapons in the East and West.'

Oke worked the controls, and his screens displayed new images for the Doctor — maps overlaid with webs of ley lines, quake vectors, target

coordinates... and casualty estimates.

'The quakes will destroy cities and kill civilians,' said the Doctor.

'I chose the lesser evil,' said Genus as a monitor screen across the room exploded. Pieces of the ceiling fell and bounced off metal

instrumentation. 'But the work isn't done yet. If we don't wipe out the last

arsenals within the hour, the missiles will launch, and the Rishiki

civilization will be completely annihilated.'

The Doctor stared thoughtfully at the maps and graphs on the

screens. The rumbling was getting stronger, and he had to make a

decision fast. 'Do you really believe you can change the future? Change

what you've foreseen?'

'I don't know,' said Genus. 'I have to try.'

'Well then.' The Doctor marched to the link cradle and plunged both

hands into the golden gel. 'Allow me to join you.'

'Thank you.' The red-and-white striped goatee replaced the green one

over Genus's chin as he lowered himself to stretch out in the gel

alongside Jo. 'I can't thank you enough.'

'Yes, yes,' said the Doctor. 'Now don't just lie there. Do something.'

When the gel took effect, the Doctor saw with his mind's eye an

incredible new world.

An intricate web of glowing, pulsing lines stretched out in all

directions. It was a world within the world — a network threaded through

the very substance of the planet Rishik.

And the network was in a state of upheaval. It wasn't at all hard to see

the disruption of the quake; it took the form of a vast surge of cherry red

energy, sizzling in a great knot through the bulging lines, roaring

straight

towards the Doctor.

What do we do now, Doctor?

Sensing a familiar presence, the Doctor whirled towards it. All he saw was a flare of golden light, bobbing in midair — but he recognised it instantly as Jo Grant.

How do we stop it? asked Jo.

Excellent question. The Doctor looked around for Genus. *Where's our resident expert?*

Just then, another presence brushed up alongside him. Its essence wasn't as familiar as Jo's, but the Doctor still recognised its voice in his

mind.

The peak of the quake is almost upon us. It was Genus. *We're almost out of time.*

Tell us what to do, said the Doctor.

Help me reverse the flow. The white-hot starburst that was Genus Fry dove into the network. The Doctor and Jo joined him.

Genus flashed down to the fattest of the swollen, crimson lines and wrapped himself around it. *Come on! I need your help!* The starburst of his essence flickered with bolts of red energy as he worked on the line. The Doctor and Jo hurtled down to wrap themselves around Genus and the line. Reaching deep, the Doctor focused all his willpower on

pushing back the flow, reversing its direction away from the mansion.

He felt it slow down, but it didn't reverse.

The pressure of the flow intensified. The Doctor could feel it pounding the planet's crust beneath Genus's estate. Supplementary bursts of energy amplified the surge... but the Doctor, Jo and Genus rallied and redoubled their efforts. The surge reared and roared like a living thing,

ramming the barricade, bending it.

And then, suddenly, it blasted off in the opposite direction.

The Doctor felt it at once: the tide of the quake was turning. It was back on the track that Genus had first plotted for it, racing towards the

last of the nuclear arsenals in the East and West. They had done it.

But not without a price.

As the surge howled off in the distance, the Doctor and Jo relaxed and let go of the line... but Genus did not. After the ordeal they'd been through, the Doctor couldn't blame him for not being able to relax.

We might have just saved the world, said the Doctor. *Tough act to follow, eh, Genus?*

Doctor? Jo floated closest to Genus. She extended a ray of her starburst substance, dipping it into his flickering essence. *Something's happened. I don't think he can answer you.*

Dirt and darkness.

That was what Genus saw when he woke. Nothing but dirt and darkness.

Just like in his vision.

So I failed after all. I failed to change the future.

And now he was dead, or as good as dead. Just enough life left in him to open his eyes and see the dirt in which he'd been buried. Just enough life to realise the sad truth of his defeat.

Strangely, he felt no panic or sorrow or rage, none of the things he'd expected. All he felt was resignation and nostalgia... and relief. His long struggle to cheat fate was over; no more stooping under the weight of his burden, no more anticipation and terror.

Just this. Dirt and darkness for all eternity.

Just peace.

Almost.

'Genus?'

A voice. Had he imagined it?

'Hello, Genus? Is anyone home?'

It was impossible. Was he entering some kind of afterlife?

If so, what was the Doctor doing there?

'I know you can hear me, Genus. Come on, open your eyes.'

But I thought my eyes were already open.

'Right then,' said the Doctor. 'Give us that chisel, will you?'

'Here, Doctor.' Another voice, the young woman's — Jo Grant.

'They're stuck shut,' said the Doctor. 'Guess he's got a little sand in

them, eh?'

Suddenly, Genus felt something — really felt something, though he'd thought he was dead. Something cold and hard sliding under his eyelid,

wedging itself inside.

And prying.

As the eyelid raised, light and colour streamed in from beyond it.

Genus glimpsed the outlines of pieces of things.

Things other than dirt and darkness.

Could it be?

Genus gathered all his willpower and focused on lifting the eyelid all the way. It felt much heavier than usual, but the prying chisel got him started.

I have to see what's out there.

He got the eyelid halfway up, and then it fell back down. On his next try, though, he got it fully open and kept it that way.

It was then that he saw something he'd never thought he'd see again.

Something extraordinary for all its impossibility.

The Doctor's smiling face.

'Good morning,' he said. 'Fancy a cuppa?'

What's going on here?

With a mighty effort, Genus got the other eyelid open. It made a gravelly sound as it moved.

'Bad news, good news time,' said the Doctor. 'Bad news first. The stress of battling the quake was too much for your first physical body.'

My first *body?*

'It's dead,' said the Doctor. 'Which brings us to the good news.'

Genus' thoughts whirled.

So I am *dead?*

The Doctor looked at someone out of Genus' eyeshot. 'Switch it on,

will you, Jo?'

Genus felt a vibration and heard a motor run. The hard surface

underneath him began to move, raising the top half of his body with it.

Soon, he was sitting up. From this new position, he had a better view

of his surroundings. He recognised the equipment of the Tun lab, some

of it smashed and dangling from the quake. He saw someone else

smiling back at him — his friend, Anderian. Oke and Erm towered over a

control console, fiery red eyes glittering from the cobalt shadows of their

craggy faces.

There was another Tun, too, sitting across the lab from him... one he

didn't recognise. Like all Tun, this new one had a body like black flint,

with metal ingot features and a giant forehead. Its only distinguishing

features were glossy patches of blue and white, streaked and swirled like

blue agate.

Who is that?

'Now about that good news,' said the Doctor. 'Fortunately, when your first body died, the insurers provided a spare.'

The Doctor walked across the lab. Only when he touched what Genus had thought was a Tun sitting there did Genus realise that he was looking at a mirror.

'I hope it suits you,' said the Doctor. 'The Tun did their best, you know.'

Genus stared at the image in the mirror, unable at first to believe his eyes.

It can't be.

But it was. When he moved his head, the head of the Tun in the mirror moved with him. When he moved his hand, the reflection moved its hand, too.

It's true.

I've become a Tun.

'I know it's a shock,' said the Doctor. 'I'm sorry to have to break it to you.'

Sorry?

At first, Genus was sorry, too... but it didn't last. Feeling sorry faded fast when he realised that he had misunderstood his visions. Instead of death, he had found new life.

Closing his eyes, he saw it — the vision of dirt and darkness. For so long, he had thought that it was a glimpse of what was to come after the

end of the world and the end of himself.

Now, Genus realised the truth. All along, he had been seeing a vision of what was to come after the world was saved, not ended. He had foreseen a future in which his mind was transplanted into the body of a Tun for a second chance at life. The dirt and darkness were not his view after death; they were what he saw when he closed his eyes in a Tun body after the start of his new life.

So things weren't so bad, not really. He was still alive, and the world hadn't ended. He had gone through some changes, and he was sure that there were struggles ahead, but a fresh start could be a good thing.

Now if someone could just invent a musical instrument that could be played by a Blockhead like him.

'Genus?' It was Anderian. 'Are you all right?'

Slowly, Genus pried his eyes open.

'What do you have to say for yourself, Genus?' said the Doctor.

When Genus spoke, he felt like he was gargling sandstone in a throat lined with sandpaper. The voice that came out sounded nothing like the one he'd had all his life — more like gravel crunching under a turning wheel — but at least it was understandable.

'Apologies... Anderian,' said Genus. 'I_ won't... be... able... to... headline... Beatfest... for... you.'

'Oh, you'll be there,' said Anderian. 'We need you to introduce the Tun heroes who saved the world.'

'Did you know,' said the Doctor, clapping Genus on the shoulder, 'that one of the most popular forms of music on the planet Earth is known as rock and roll? And that many of Earth's most famous musicians are called rock stars?'

'Rock... and... roll?' Genus laughed, making a sound like two stones cracking together. 'Then... I... guess... this... makes... me... a... true... rock... star.'

On A Pedestal

Kathleen O David

An adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie and Victoria

The only light on the moor was the thinnest moonlight from the waning moon in the clear night sky. The sounds of cattle and sheep floated through the air. Three men hid in a thicket peering into the darkness.

'Willie, this is daft,' said the shortest of the three. 'Your father'll find out and the wrath of God will be mild compared to what he'll do.'

'Shush, Bran,' said the biggest of the three. "Tis a fine idea and you're just jealous you didn't think of it first.'

'The two of you shush,' said the third man. 'I swear your babble will

wake the dead.'

'Sorry Willie,' said both men, deferring to their leader.

Willie looked out on to the field at the animals clumped into groups.

He pointed and said, 'There it is.'

You want to steal his prize bull?' asked Bran. 'Malcolm, you must talk

him out of this madness.'

‘Ah, Willie,' said Malcolm, 'are you sure this is what you want to be

doing? I mean your father just got things sorted out from the last time

and finished paying off the damages.'

'That's why we'll not be getting caught,' said Willie. Bran strangled a

laugh and tried to disguise it as a cough without much success. 'And you

both can just go home and hide under your mother's skirts if you find this

too fearful for you.'

Bran bristled at the insult. 'Bran Shaw is not afeared of anything.'

'I think you're both idiots,' muttered Malcolm. 'But what's your plan?'

Willie grinned, rose from his observation point and walked back to a

thicket. 'Her,' he said as he brought his father's heifer out of hiding.

'What?' said his companions in unison.

'Watch and learn, lads,' said Willie. He grabbed a length of rope from

the ground next to him. Cautiously, he walked the cow towards the bull.

The bull glanced at them with disdain, then sniffed the air and looked

again with interest at the cow. Willie led her away and the bull followed

them into the thicket. Bran and Malcolm joined their friend, who was using the rope to fashion a makeshift halter for the bull.

'You need a female to catch a male,' said Willie. 'Now let's hide these two before the sun comes up.' The men led the animals to Willie's barn.

If they had stayed just five minutes longer, they would have witnessed the appearance of a strange blue light in the fields, followed by the materialisation of a mysterious blue box...

'He was one of the greatest heroes of Scotland!' Jamie McCrimmon shouted. Victoria Waterfield gave a very unladylike snort.

'He was a villain and a rogue! He broke the King's law and killed

innocent people!'

The Doctor had no idea how the argument had started. All he knew was that Jamie and Victoria had been walking down the TARDIS corridor to the console room, arguing about William Wallace. Jamie, ever the Scotsman, revered him as a hero. Victoria, a patriotic woman of Victorian England, felt the opposite. She proceeded to list her reasons why Wallace was no hero. Jamie replied very heatedly with his list of reasons why Wallace was the greatest human being ever to live. Jamie finally stormed out of the console room leaving Victoria in tears. The Doctor awkwardly tried to comfort her, but she ran off to her room.

The Doctor sighed and went over to the TARDIS console. 'At least you're not shouting, old girl.' The console seemed to purr under his hand and then with a jerk and a lurch that knocked the Doctor off his feet, the TARDIS moved on to their next destination.

Jamie wandered into the console room. 'Doctor?' he called out, expecting an immediate reply. Instead, he found himself listening to the electronic hum to which he had become accustomed. He looked at the console and saw a piece of paper with a message on it. He grabbed it and went to Victoria's room.

He knocked, and she bade him enter in a sleepy voice. 'What do you want?' she asked.

'I need your help,' he said sheepishly.

'Why?'

Jamie held up the piece of paper. 'I cannae find the Doctor and he left this on the console.'

Victoria held out her hand and Jamie gave her the note.

Dear Victoria and Jamie,

I have gone for a short walk. Please stay near the TARDIS if you wish to go out. We are on Earth right now but I am not sure where or when.

See you soon.

The Doctor.

'Well?' asked Jamie.

'Well what?'

'Shall we go and see where we are?'

Victoria shook her head. 'I'm not sure that's such a good idea. It sounds like the Doctor wants us to stay put.'

'But he said we could go out.'

'What he said and what he implied are two different things.' 'I'm going out,' said Jamie defiantly.

'Fine,' Victoria replied, 'you do what you want.' She shut her bedroom door firmly on him.

Jamie stood for a moment trying to form some sort of reply or at least a retort, then decided to let it go. He went to his room and got his sheepskin coat, then returned to the console room and turned on the

monitor. The sun was just about up and the golden glow across the moors looked inviting. Shrugging into his coat, he stepped out of the TARDIS, closing the door behind him.

'Ahem.'

Turning, he found himself at the wrong end of a pike.

'Where is he?' demanded the man holding the pike, angrily.

'Who?' asked Jamie.

'You're not to play dumb with me, laddie. I can tell if you're lying.'

Jamie looked past the pike to the man behind it. The red beard and hair were rather unkempt but not filthy. He was dressed in a shirt, a

warm waistcoat and a kilt. *Kilt*, thought Jamie, happily.

'Scotland,' he said, taking in a deep breath of the air. 'I'm back in Scotland.'

The man with the pike seemed confused by Jamie's response. 'Aye, where did you think you were?'

'I didn't know. But I should have,' said Jamie as he took another deep breath of cool morning air, savouring the chill in his lungs.

Another man came running up. 'Duncan,' he said breathlessly, 'I cannae find him anywhere. Maybe he ran off... ' His voice trailed off when he saw Jamie. 'Who is this?'

Duncan said, 'We haven't got that far in the conversation.'

'He's a McCrimmon. I know the tartan. A bit far from home aren't you, laddie?'

'Where are we exactly?'

'We're just outside of Rowlands Gill.'

'Then I am a wee bit out of the way,' replied Jamie.

'And you decided to take Douglas's prize bull back home?'

'What prize bull?'

'You're still playing innocent with me, laddie? I wouldn't, were I in your

shoes. Sir Douglas doesn't brook cattle thieves on his land.'

Jamie's face reddened. 'I'm no thief. I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Well,' said Duncan tightening his grip on the pike, 'if you did not take the bull then you won't mind answering to Sir Douglas himself.'

So Jamie found himself being marched to Rowlands Gill and a meeting with Sir Douglas against his will.

Victoria felt bad the minute she closed the door on Jamie. She hadn't meant to be so abrupt but she still felt upset over what he had said earlier. Why couldn't he just have a reasonable discussion about things rather than get so angry about a man who was a coward and a villain? There were times she had to remind herself that Jamie hadn't had her advantages in life and that he came from a more primitive time than she did. She went to her wardrobe and grabbed a coat. She had better go after him and keep him out of trouble until the Doctor got back.

She walked into the console room, glanced at the monitor and stopped. A man with a pike was threatening Jamie. She watched as

Jamie was led away, chewing her lower lip as she tried to work out if she should go after him or wait for the Doctor. She didn't like the idea of explaining to the Doctor how she had let two men take Jamie away while she just watched. So she went back to her room for paper and pen, composed a note and left it on the console for the Doctor to find. Then she set off after Jamie.

The air was crisp and clean with the pungent scent of cow floating through it. Victoria set off in the direction the men had taken Jamie, but

they were nowhere to be seen. Once she reached a little stone wall, she

saw a well-worn path on the other side. Looking both ways, she saw

smoke coming from one direction. She headed towards it.

As she walked, she listened for any sound that would give her a clue

that she was going in the right direction. Much of what she heard scared

her, especially what she imagined to be the sounds of wild animals

coming from all around her in the forest.

'Hello,' said a voice from behind her. Victoria let out a startled shriek.

‘Och, lady, I won't be harming you!'

Victoria and turned to the speaker. She saw a tall young man with

broad shoulders grinning at her. He didn't look very scary.

'Now, let's try again,' said the man. 'Hello, lady. My friends call me

Willie. What brings you to this neck of the woods?'

'I'm looking for my friend. He was taken away by two men,' Victoria

said. 'And my name is Victoria, thank you.'

'Well, Victoria, do you know where they took him?'

'No. But they seemed very angry about something. They led him off in

this direction, I believe.' She described the two men that had captured

her friend.

Was one of the men brandishing a pike?'

'Why, yes he was! How did you know?'

'I think I know where your friend is now,' said Willie, 'and if you would

care to come with me, I'll take you to him.'

Victoria looked carefully at the man in front of her. He didn't look threatening and if he could lead her to Jamie then all the better. She could collect Jamie and take him back to the TARDIS before the Doctor even knew that he was in trouble again.

'Lead the way then,' she said.

The Doctor returned to the TARDIS to find not his two companions but a note to greet him.

Jamie captured by two men just outside the TARDIS. I have gone to find out what happened to him. With any luck you will never read this note.

Victoria

'What was she thinking?' the Doctor muttered, 'off by herself trying to be brave. One would think she would know better by now.' He wandered further into the TARDIS to the storerooms, picked a up few things and

put them in his pockets. He checked to make sure he had his recorder and stepped out of the TARDIS, carefully locking the door behind him. The grass outside the TARDIS was covered in tracks, both animal and human. The Doctor pulled out a magnifying glass and examined them closely, muttering to himself. 'Early this morning, one man came this way with an animal, met with two men and went,' he spun around in a circle, 'that way with two animals. Hmm. Then later on, Jamie came

out

of the TARDIS and went this way with two men and Victoria followed

them.' He looked up at the sky. 'Oh, what to do, what to do!' And he set

off to follow his companions' tracks.

Jamie was tied to a post, facing an angry group of men. From what

he could understand, Duncan the pike-wielder and his friend Brian

worked as herdsmen for Sir Douglas. They were missing their lord's prize

bull, and they thought that Jamie had taken it. Jamie was trying to figure

out how he was going to get back to the TARDIS in one piece since

there was a lot of talk of hanging.

Another man came over and looked him over carefully. ‘So you're a

McCrimmon, are you?'

'Yes. I am James McCrimmon.'

'I'm Ewan McCrimmon. Who's your father?'

Jamie considered what the Doctor had told him many times about not

changing history — unless, of course, you knew what you were doing.

'That's a bit complicated.'

'Bastard then?' said Ewan with a grin.

'I am the son of Donald McCrimmon!' Jamie bristled at the thought.

Ewan looked at him thoughtfully. 'You do have the look of my cousin

Donald about you. So, cousin, how did you get yourself into this mess?'

'I've done nothing wrong, said Jamie angrily. 'Those two men accused

me of stealing with no evidence.'

'I believe you, cousin. But my words hold no weight around here. Sir

Douglas's prize bull went missing last night and you just happened to be

found in the pasture where it was last seen. I'll bet Duncan had a go at

the drink while he was on watch again and was sleeping it off when the

bull was stolen. You happened to be there when he finally came to.

Therefore you are the one he can blame for the bull's disappearance.'

'But I didn't take the bull! I swear it.'

'Do you have anyone who can back up your story?'

'There are my two friends who were with me.'

'Unless they were born here, their word will not hold much weight.

May God provide you with a miracle because I think that may be the only

thing that will be getting you out of this.'

'I guess I should have listened to Victoria,' Jamie said with a sigh and

settled in for a long wait, hoping that the Doctor was on his way.

The Doctor followed Victoria's tracks to the path on the other side of

the low stone wall. He sniffed the air, looking to his left and right. He put

a finger in his mouth and then pulled it out to test the wind.

'This way I think,' he said to no one in particular. After a while he

noticed that another set of footprints joined Victoria's. 'Oh my,' he added

and hurried along a little faster.

Victoria and Willie walked to Rowlands Gill, all the while talking about

this, that and the other. Victoria found Willie to be a very thoughtful and

well-spoken man. He seemed genuinely concerned about her being out

in the woods on her own. From time to time she glanced at him shyly. He

reminded her of an oak tree, solid and tall. His unruly brown hair was tied

back with a leather thong but a few strands had escaped and he kept

pushing them out of his eyes. His face was that of a man who had just

left his boyhood behind. His legs looked strong and thick, again

reminding her of an oak. She was not shocked by the amount of leg that

he showed since she had become used to Jamie wearing his kilt in the

same fashion.

'What are you thinking about so deeply?' Willie asked.

'Nothing of any real consequence,' she said. 'I was just wondering

where my friends were.'

'Rather remiss of them to leave you all by yourself in these woods.

We haven't had many problems recently with brigands or bandits, but it

doesnae mean they are not out there.'

'Nor does it mean that we left her totally alone either,' came a voice

from the path behind them.

Willie jumped to a defensive stance and held the axe in front of him.

Victoria smiled at the sound of the voice and pushed past Willie. 'Doctor!'

she said with glee.

'Hello, Victoria. Who's your young friend here?'

Willie rested his axe back on his shoulder and said, 'William Wallace

at your service.'

Victoria's turned sharply at the name. 'It can't be,' she said softly.

The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder and said, 'Steady now. Let's

keep the cats in the bag this time, shall we?' He cleared his throat and

said louder, ‘So where are we off to?'

'Rowlands Gill," said Willie. 'I think Sir Douglas has your friend Jamie.'

The three set off at a more rapid pace for the village.

Jamie was getting tired of answering the same questions over and

over again. He could tell that his captors were getting tired of the same

answers. *No*, he didn't take the bull. *No*, he didn't know who did or where

the bull was, he was just here with his friends. *No*, he didn't know where

his friends had gone. After a while there was pushing and threatening

along with some punching for good measure. Jamie steeled himself for

the next blow and chanted in his head, *The Doctor will show up and sort*

this all out.

Then, a voice bellowed from the doorway. 'What is going on here?'

Jamie looked up at the man who entered. It was Sir Douglas. A well-

dressed man who exuded both power and control, he had an air about him that suggested he would brook no funny business. Duncan walked over to him with his head bowed.

'Sir, we found this man in your cow pasture.'

'And?'

‘Tarb is gone.'

Sir Douglas said in a quiet, dangerous tone, 'Gone?'

Duncan pushed his story quickly through his lips. 'I was on watch and had just gone off to relieve myself. When I got back to my post I saw this man standing there and Tarb was gone.'

'Must have been a long piss for one man to steal a bull.'

'He says that he has friends with him. Maybe they took the bull and he was looking for what else to steal.'

Sir Douglas grabbed Duncan's head and forced the man to look him in the eye. 'Or had you been off drinking again?'

'My lord, I swear I didn't!'

Sir Douglas cuffed Duncan's head with such force he sent the man to the ground. 'Don't swear! You break your oath to me and mine and you will find yourself and your family out on the streets.' He turned and looked at Jamie. ‘So who are you and what are you doing on my lands?'

Jamie sighed and for what felt like the hundredth time tried to explain what he was doing in Sir Douglas's cow pasture.

‘McCrimmon?' asked Sir Douglas after he was done.

'Aye.'

'What did you do before you took your trip across Scotland?'

'I farmed a bit with my father and my brothers. I was also a piper for

the Clan McLaren.'

'A piper?' asked Sir Douglas. 'Are you any good?'

If there was a point of pride for Jamie, his piping ability was it. It was

the one thing that he had no doubt that he could do well. He drew himself

to his full height, and looking Sir Douglas straight in the face said, 'Aye.'

Sir Douglas laughed, not unkindly. ‘So we've a piper in my cow

pasture and my prize bull has wandered off. Care to play for the truth?'

'I don't have my pipes with me,' said Jamie.

Sir Douglas turned to Brian. 'Find me Colin and have him bring his

pipes.'

Brian left the room as if shot out of a cannon. He shortly returned with

a man stooped with age, carrying a set of bagpipes.

The elderly man said, 'I'm here. I'm here. Now what was so important

that you sent Brian to drag me from my house?'

'We have a piper in our midst.'

'Oh? And who would that be?'

Sir Douglas pointed at Jamie. 'Him.'

Colin limped over to Jamie and looked hard. 'He is but a boy.'

Jamie said, 'I have been piping since I can remember. I started on the chanter at my father's knee.'

The old man laughed. 'The proof is in the piping.'

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'A bit difficult without hands,' said Jamie.

They untied him from the post and gave him some cool water to drink.

He rubbed his wrists and shook his hands to get the feeling back into them. Colin handed him the pipes. Jamie examined them carefully and tested the reed. Whoever owned these had kept them in good shape, but they hadn't been played in a while. He filled the bag and thought about what to play. He decided on a simple tune that his father had taught him long ago. As he played, he thought of his father and brothers, whom he had not seen in so long. Then he switched to a lively jig. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see feet tapping the beat as he played. He played a lively march and then switched to a soulful dirge. When he finished, there was silence in the room.

'Did you pipe my bull off to faerieland?' asked Sir Douglas after a moment.

'Sir?' Jamie was confused.

'You have a touch of the *fae* about you, lad.'

'Now there's no need to confuse talent with superstition,' came a

familiar voice from the doorway.

'Doctor!' exclaimed Jamie, with a sudden rush of relief. Behind the Doctor stood Victoria and a tall man with an axe.

‘So, Sir Douglas. I hear you are missing a cow,' said the Doctor. 'Not a cow,' said Duncan. 'My lord's prize bull.'

The Doctor looked Duncan over. 'Can I see the bottom of your boots?'

'What?'

'The bottom of your boots, I need to see them.' The Doctor quickly picked up one of Duncan's feet, throwing him off balance. Jamie caught him and held him steady.

Sir Douglas watched the Doctor scrutinise the footwear of his employee for a while. 'Does this have some sort of purpose?' he asked.

'Well, yes, in fact it *does*," said the Doctor earnestly. 'Why don't we go back to the scene of the crime and see if we can work out who really took the bull — because I can tell you without a doubt it wasn't Jamie.'

'And how do you plan to do that?' asked a sceptical Sir Douglas.

'It's all in the looking that you can find the truth,' said the Doctor.

In a short while, Jamie found himself back at the fence of the cow pasture with Sir Douglas and a group of interested parties.

'I think at this point that Sir Douglas and I should proceed so I can show him my findings,' said the Doctor.

'Do you think that's a good idea, Sir Douglas?' asked Duncan.

The Doctor said, 'You will all be here looking on so I can do your lord

no harm if that is your concern.'

Sir Douglas laughed. 'And if you think that I cannot take on this old man, then you think less of me than you should. Lead on, Doctor, and show me this evidence of your friend's innocence.'

The Doctor hopped easily over the fence while Sir Douglas walked down to the gate and entered the field.

'Sir Douglas, be careful where you step. I want to be able to show you

all the evidence of what happened. Now I am assuming that it rained here within the last two days.'

'Aye, we had a heavy rain on Sunday. Soaked everything.'

'Including the ground, which is why it is still good for footprints. And it is these footprints that tell the story of the missing bull. But we really need to start from the end and work our way to the beginning.' The Doctor picked up a stick from the ground and pointed to the grass around the TARDIS. 'Here you can see clearly the prints of three men standing for some time. You can also see the prints of two men coming from that direction, which is, I believe, the way to the village.'

Sir Douglas grunted his affirmation.

'Having looked at Duncan's boots I can safely say that one of the men standing here was Duncan. Another was Jamie, since you can follow his boot prints to the TARDIS here.'

Sir Douglas looked at the blue box in the middle of his field as if he

was seeing it for the first time. 'Where did that thing come from?'

'It belongs to me and I assure you that when I leave it will go with me.

But that's not important right now. What is important are these tracks.' He

bent down and pointed to a set of bootprints going the other direction

along with some hoofprints. ‘If we follow these tracks we find something

very interesting.'

Sir Douglas followed the Doctor into the thicket. 'Now,' continued the

Doctor, 'whoever concealed the cow here to lure the bull is the man who

took the bull. Notice that there are three sets of bootprints here and none

of these match those where Duncan and Jamie were standing.'

Sir Douglas agreed that the prints were different. ‘So who took the

bull?'

'I have my suspicions but I would like to see if I can give you a

satisfactory conclusion to this. Let's go back and join the others. I have a

plan.'

They walked back to the group. Sir Douglas pointed at Jamie and

said, 'The Doctor has proven to me that McCrimmon did not take the

bull.'

The Doctor looked at the small crowd of people watching and said,

'Willie, could you come here a minute?' Willie walked over to the Doctor.

The Doctor looked at his bootprints for a second then said, 'Would you like to tell me where you hid the bull?'

'What?' bellowed Willie. 'I do not know what you're talking about.'

'But your tracks match the tracks in that thicket.'

Willie seemed to be contemplating knocking the Doctor down, but managed to get hold of himself. He looked guiltily at Victoria's hurt expression. 'All right, I admit I took the bull. He's in my father's barn.'

'William Wallace, what am I going to do with you?' asked Sir Douglas. 'This is not the first time you have walked off with another man's property.'

'It was a joke. I was going to return him. The disappearing and reappearing bull — it would be a tale told all winter.'

'William, your jokes are going to get you or one of your friends killed one of these days.'

Willie took them to his barn where the bull was contentedly munching dried grass and looking very pleased with itself.

'Duncan, return my bull to its barn,' said Sir Douglas. Duncan nodded and went into the pen with a halter and led the bull off. Then he turned to

Willie. 'Now, Willie, there is the matter of my stud fee.'

'Stud fee? I just left him out here with these cows. What he did was totally up to him.'

'Listen boy, your attitude needs a serious adjustment. Today you

almost got a man hanged. Do you even comprehend what could have happened to McCrimmon here?'

Willie looked at Jamie and said, 'I apologise.' He held out his hand.

Jamie pulled himself up to his full height, which still didn't match Willie's, and said, 'Tell it to my ringing head and sore ribs.' He took Willie's hand and shook it. 'But the Good Lord always taught us to forgive and forget.'

As they were talking another man joined the group. It was Willie's father.

'Dare I ask what my son has been up to now?' he asked with a sigh.

'Avoiding his stud fees by "borrowing" Tarb, David. He told me that he was planning to return the bull.'

David cuffed Willie and said, 'Your mother swore to me that neither she nor any of the servants dropped you on your head after you were born but it would not surprise me in the least. Have you the brains that God gave you, lad?'

'Ow, Father, I did not mean — '

His father finished for him. ' — any harm. How many times have I heard that song? What's the damage, Colin?'

‘If I might make a suggestion,' the Doctor said. 'I think there is a simple solution here. I think that William should give first choice of any calves to Sir Douglas — up to half. How about that?'

'But — 'Willie started and was quickly cut off by his father.

'I think that'll work. Sir Douglas, what say you?'

'Aye. That works for me too.'

Willie kicked the ground in disgust. He would have owned up to having the bull before they did anything to Jamie but now he was going to lose cattle in the bargain. This day was not going as planned. Plus he knew his father was unhappy with him, which meant another lecture about duty and how his family name must remain unsullied. He wondered how it could get any worse... And then his father invited the three strangers to dinner. The only good part was that he would be able to spend more time in Victoria's company. She was an interesting girl indeed.

The meal was a raucous affair. Willie's father had invited various members of the community to come and break bread, so they had moved the tables outside to have enough room. Willie was impressed

that his father had put together such a feast in a short time. The Doctor was at the head of the table, leaving Jamie and Victoria sitting with Willie at the lower end.

'Jamie, I didnae mean to get you in trouble. It was meant to be a joke.'

'Well it would have been a bad joke if he had been hurt,' said Victoria.

Jamie was on his second beer. ‘Aw, Victoria, it was only a lark. I

cannae say I haven't done worse.'

‘Still...' she started.

Jamie interrupted, 'Don't bring your English sensibility into this. You don't understand how things work here.'

'You're English?' asked Willie, in surprise.

'Yes. I'm from London.'

'And you're wandering around here with a Scotsman and a wise man?' 'Wise man?'

'He means the Doctor,' Jamie whispered to her rather loudly. 'I knew that.'

Jamie and Willie laughed at the scowl on Victoria's face. She stood and said, 'I'll leave you boys to your beer.' She walked up to the Doctor

and sat next to him.

'How did you end up travelling with her?' asked Willie.

'She's angry with me right now because we had a fight.'

'Why?'

'She said some unkind things about one of my heroes and I took offence at her remarks.'

'Who?'

Jamie stopped himself just before blurting it out. He took a look at the man who was his hero. 'No one you would know,' he said quietly.

Willie could tell that he had touched a nerve so he decided to change the subject. 'Do you like to fish?'

'Fish?'

'Yes, fish. It's not a trick question.'

'He loves it, as do I,' said the Doctor sitting down next to Jamie.

'Well, why don't we get up early and go down to the river?' asked

Willie.

'That sounds lovely,' the Doctor said. A group of musicians started to

play a tune. Jamie borrowed some pipes and went to join them. Victoria

sat watching the dancing, until she noticed that Willie was standing next

to her.

'Do you dance?' asked Willie.

'Yes, I do.'

'Care to take a turn?'

She took his hand and they joined the other couples on the dance

floor. The Doctor stood back and watched.

'Your daughter has enchanted my son,' said David Wallace.

'Oh, Victoria is not my daughter. I'm her guardian.'

‘Ah. Well, I've not seen my son pay this much attention to a girl

before.' David clapped the Doctor on the back, almost knocking him over,

and went to talk to some other people. The Doctor looked at the two

young people on the lawn. They had finished their dance and wandered

off to sit down.

'I hadn't done that in a while,' said Jamie, wiping the sweat from the

back of his neck as he joined the Doctor.

'What?' asked the Doctor absent-mindedly.

'Played the pipes with other musicians. I had forgotten how much fun that can be.'

'As much fun as meeting one of your heroes?'

Jamie looked at the ground.

'He is still *The Wallace*, Jamie, and he is still destined to become the Guardian of Scotland.'

'He's a boy who steals cattle, then pretends it was a joke.'

'Give him time, Jamie, and I assure you he will become a man you can respect and honour.'

'I'm sure you are right.'

'But sometimes it is hard to see your hero "warts and all", eh?'

Jamie nodded and watched Willie and Victoria. 'They look cosy. I wonder what they're talking about.'

'Fishing,' replied the Doctor, with a wink.

Willie was telling Victoria about the planned fishing trip for the next morning.

'I'm coming too.'

'You're what?'

'I know how to fish. My father taught me at a young age.'

'Does your father know where you are now?'

Victoria felt the tears welling in her eyes. She swallowed hard and said quietly, 'He died... during a battle.'

'I'm sorry, Victoria. I shouldn't have asked.'

'No. It's all right. There's no way you could have known.'

The music started again. Victoria noticed that the Doctor had joined the group with his recorder. He seemed to be having fun, and she had never seen Jamie look so much in his element as he did now, playing the pipes as he had done since he was a boy.

'Do you want to dance again?' asked Willie.

'No, thank you. I am quite tired,' she said with a shy smile. They sat and watched the other dancers.

Suddenly a youth came running over to David Wallace and whispered frantically to him. David signalled the musicians to stop playing then called to his wife. 'Margaret, get the women and children inside. Fitzroy is on his way.'

Victoria asked, 'What's going on?'

Willie sighed. 'John Fitzroy is the local captain of the English army. He's looking to get a promotion back to England, or at least to France, and he's trying to do it on our backs.'

'Whatever do you mean?' Victoria's question was never answered, as

the English captain and a number of soldiers came into view.

'What's the meaning of this?' asked David Wallace.

'Wallace, you know the law. You can't have unlawful assemblies.'

'I'm having some friends over to meet a visitor,' said David. 'The

Doctor and his friends did me a service today and I was repaying him for

his help. There was no sedition going on. It is just a small party.'

'I see an assembly of men who are well-known for talk against the

crown.'

Willie joined his father. 'England doesn't own us.'

‘Ah, the pup barks,' said Captain Fitzroy. 'You had better make sure

he keeps a civil tongue in his head, David. We don't want a repeat of last

time.'

Victoria joined the Doctor and Jamie. The movement caught the eye

of the captain. 'And who do we have here?'

Jamie stepped in front of Victoria and crossed his arms. The Doctor

walked over to the captain, grabbed his hand and started to shake it

enthusiastically. 'Hello! I'm the Doctor. These are my companions, Jamie

and Victoria.'

Captain Fitzroy pulled his hand out of the Doctor's and said, 'Pleasure

to meet you,' in a tone that indicated the opposite. He turned again to

David Wallace. 'I strongly suggest that you bring an end to this... party.'

Willie clenched his fists. He felt the Doctor at his elbow and heard him

say, 'Not here and not now, William Wallace. There will be a time and a

place for you to be heard.'

Fitzroy and his company left only after everyone except the Doctor

and his friends had gone.

Willie said angrily, 'Father, we cannot live like this.'

'Patience is a virtue, William,' said David, 'Our time will come.' Willie looked at Victoria. ‘So, we still going fishing?'

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. 'Yes, I believe we are.'

Willie smiled. 'Why don't we meet back at the pasture where that blue box is tomorrow morning? I know a good brook naught but a stone's throw from there where the fish leap at the chance of being caught.'

They all shook hands and the Doctor and his companions walked back to the TARDIS by the clear starlight.

Very early the next morning Victoria heard a knock on her door, as well as the too-cheerful voice of the Doctor. 'The fish aren't going to catch themselves, you know.'

She groaned and said, 'I'll be there in a minute.' She dressed quickly and joined the Doctor and Jamie in the console room. The Doctor was wearing a pair of rubber boots that seemed to go up to his waist. 'What are you wearing?' she said between giggles.

'They are called waders and I think you will find that they are quite handy when fishing,' said the Doctor.

Victoria got her giggles under control in time to see Willie striding towards the TARDIS on the scanner.

Jamie and the Doctor picked up fishing rods and various other pieces of equipment and nets. Victoria opened the door for them and

dissolved

into laughter again as the two men tried to navigate the narrow exit out of

the TARDIS with the fishing gear.

Willie had a rod slung over his shoulder and a small bucket in his

hand. 'D'you think you have enough stuff there Doctor?' he asked.

The Doctor looked over what he and Jamie were carrying and said, 'I

believe so.'

'Well let's go. Although it'll be better if we cross the field and stay to

the bushes. I saw some English soldiers lurking around this morning and

they didn't look happy at all.'

'Is there a problem?' asked Victoria.

'Well, the place I am taking you to is claimed by King Edward and the

English. They do get a bit upset if they find you there fishing on what

they call the King's land.'

'How upset?' asked Jamie.

'They tend to arrest you,' said Willie with a grin. 'But then that's half

the fun of fishing there.'

They walked about half a mile from the cow pasture and found

themselves at a beautiful running stream. The bank was covered in soft

river grass and the leaves of the trees provided a green canopy. A light

breeze played across the water and the bank smelled of sweet loam.

Victoria took a deep breath and held it in her lungs as long as she could.

It was so peaceful here.

Jamie was examining the river. 'There are some big fish in there.'

'Aye, this river never disappoints. Last time I caught a trout that was

this big.' He held his hands apart at more than a shoulder length.

Victoria laughed. 'Isn't that always the case?'

'I am telling you God's honest truth.'

The Doctor opened one of his tackle boxes and rummaged around for

the right sort of fly. 'I am sure you are, William. Ah, there it is.' He pulled

out a blue-green fishing fly from the box and proceeded to attach it to his

rod. He tested his line, then waded out into the river and cast it.

Willie and Jamie set up their own poles and started fishing from the

bank. Victoria sat between them and watched the Doctor fish. Not much

was said, but they all knew the cardinal rule of keeping quiet so as not to

scare the fish. Jamie was the first with a bite. He tried to pull it in but his

line snapped. He grumbled as he went back to the tackle box to repair it.

Victoria gave a contented sigh.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Willie.

'Absolutely nothing, and it is glorious. I can't remember a time with the

Doctor that has been this quiet.'

Right at that moment, the Doctor yelped as a fish caught his line. He

worked carefully, letting the line in and out to reel in his catch. He

finally

took his net and scooped up the fish for all to see. He waded back to the

bank with the trout trying to flip out of the net.

'Och, Doctor, that's a real beauty you've got there,' said Willie.

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The Doctor smiled and nodded. He removed the hook from the trout

and threw it back into the river.

'Hey! What did you do that for? That could have been our dinner,' said

Willie.

'I'm a believer in catch and release,' said the Doctor.

‘If you don't mind Doctor, I believe in catch and eat,' said Willie,

'especially since I did not bring anything for lunch.'

‘To each his own,' said the Doctor, as he moved back out into the

river.

Willie caught the next fish, followed by Jamie. In short order they had

a nice string of catches. Victoria watched as Willie and Jamie expertly

gutted the fish. The Doctor caught a couple more and let them go,

despite the protests of the other men. Victoria even borrowed a rod and

caught a decent sized salmon which she handed over to the boys to be

gutted.

'This'll be a fine meal indeed with a couple left over to sell at the

market,' said Willie.

‘If you get that far Wallace,' came a voice from across the river. They

looked up to see Captain Fitzroy with two soldiers. 'I believe that poaching is against the law.'

Willie's hand tightened around the knife he had been using to clean the fish. 'You know as well as I do, Fitzroy, that my people have been fishing in this river for decades. This is our land, our river and our fish.'

'That's *Captain* Fitzroy to you.'

'Well this is a rather sticky wicket,' said the Doctor.

'What shall we do, Doctor?' asked Jamie, gripping his knife with as much fervour as Willie was.

'Let's see if we can talk,' said the Doctor.

Captain Fitzroy waded across the river with his men, sword drawn.

'Listen,' the Doctor said. 'Why don't we give you the fish that we caught and we'll be on our way?'

'Save your breath, Doctor,' Willie said with a growl. 'It is me he is after. He has wanted to bag a Wallace for some time now.'

'Ah, young William,' said Fitzroy. 'Considering the trouble you have caused me for the last year, you should be grateful I don't cut you down on the spot.'

'Try it,' said Willie defiantly.

'Don't tempt me,' said Fitzroy as his two soldiers closed in.

'There's no need for violence,' said Victoria.

Fitzroy laughed. 'Little girl, you don't know what you are talking about.'

Victoria bravely pulled herself to her full height. 'Captain Fitzroy, I find

you a disgrace to the English army. You are rude and vindictive. I plan to

tell the authorities exactly what you are like, and you will find yourself on

the wrong side of a court martial.'

'Oh that's a great thing to say,' Jamie muttered.

Fitzroy smiled unpleasantly. 'Then we should leave no witnesses,

should we?' He lunged at Victoria with his sword only to find himself on

the wrong end of Willie’s knife. He stood up straight and looked

surprised. Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell over. There

was a pause as everyone looked at the body, then Willie grabbed

Fitzroy's sword from the ground. Jamie turned and grabbed a pike from

one of the soldiers, standing side by side with Willie, between Fitzroy's

men and Victoria.

The Doctor said, 'Gentlemen, you're outnumbered. I believe the

sensible course of action would be for you to collect Captain Fitzroy's

body and be on your way. Take the fish as well — they belong to the

crown, after all.'

'Doctor!' Willie said with outrage.

'We can afford to be magnanimous, Willie, seeing as how you killed

their captain. I'd say a few fish are a small price to pay.'

Under Willie and Jamie's watchful eyes — and armed hands — one soldier collected the fish while the other gathered up Fitzroy's corpse.

'Let's go and see your father, shall we?' said the Doctor gravely, 'Those two may come back with a few more of their comrades.'

They walked back to the Wallace house through the woods to avoid any more soldiers. But the news of what happened at the river had already reached there. David met them in the thicket behind his property

with the words, 'Well, you've done it this time, son.'

'I didn't mean —'

'You're going to have to get out of here before the soldiers find you. Just tell me, William, was this a just killing?'

Jamie stepped up and said, 'It *was* a just killing, sir. The captain would have killed all of us, starting with Victoria.'

William's mother brought out a backpack and a walking stick. 'You'd best be going.' She hugged him. 'Know that I love you.'

'Go to your uncle's monastery and give him this letter,' said David. He hugged his son tightly. 'Do me and the name of Wallace proud.'

'He will do that,' said the Doctor. 'I'm afraid we must depart as well.'

'Doctor, before you go,' David began. 'Sir Douglas left a gift for McCrimmon here.' He went into the house and retrieved Colin's bagpipes.

Jamie's eyes widened. 'I cannae take these.'

'Sir Douglas and Colin both insisted, lad. Old Colin said he'd never heard anyone play them like you, and it'd be a shame if you never got

to

pipe with them again. Consider it an apology for how you were treated.'

Jamie thanked them, and the three travellers returned to the TARDIS.

Victoria, who had been quiet all the way back from the Wallace

house, said, 'We could take him with us. He could travel with us. Then he

wouldn't have to die in that horrible fashion. He didn't do anything wrong.

He was defending us.'

The Doctor took her hands in his and said, 'Victoria, we can't change

history. You know that.'

'But he's a good man,' said Victoria, on the verge of tears. 'We can

save him.'

Jamie said, 'According to the legend of William Wallace, he started

his journey to save Scotland when he got into a fight with English

soldiers over fishing on the King's land.'

‘So it was always going to happen,' said the Doctor. 'We just

happened to be there.'

Jamie said, 'I'm going to go to my room for a bit.' He left Victoria and

the Doctor in the console room. Shortly, the sound of bagpipes wafted

through the TARDIS. It was a haunting tune that filled Victoria with both

hope and sadness.

'What's he playing?' asked Victoria.

'It is a funeral dirge for William Wallace.'

Victoria crossed herself and said a prayer for the soul of William Wallace as the Doctor sent the TARDIS spinning back into the time vortex and on to their next destination.

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Clean-up on Aisle Two

James Swallow

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

Across the field of combat the Tenvarik horde ranged against them, battering their crude halberds against their war-shields, screaming out battle cries in their whistling, blood-curdling tongue. They outnumbered them tenfold, and the remains of the armies that had already perished on the tips of their blades lay underfoot, skulls compacted into the churned mud. A lesser warrior would have broken at such a sight, but the Lord General was not such a man. He filled his broad, muscled chest with a deep breath and released it slowly through his teeth. He was a mass of coiled fury, ready to be released in an instant of punishing ferocity.

'My kinsmen, this day will be hard-fought,' he intoned, turning to face his soldiers, 'but know this. I will stand with you and shed my blood to mingle with yours, and together we will drive these invaders from the lands of our ancestors. Or we will perish in the attempt, and great songs will be sung of our deeds.'

One of his men, a youth with long, lank black hair who held his sword

like he was afraid of it, glanced up at him with terrified eyes and swallowed hard. 'My master,' he husked, 'but we are so few...'

The Lord General gave the youth an indulgent smile. 'Fear not, my young friend. Each of us, even you, is worth a hundred of their worthless hides. And we shall teach that lesson to them today, written in their blood across the blackboard of their souls!' He bared his teeth. 'For victory! Victory and — '

'Uh, Randall?'

The moment popped like a soap bubble; he blinked and the glorious daydream vanished. Once again he was sitting in the uncomfortable chair in his closet of an office, with the fan on his cluttered desk whirring irritably at him. 'What?' he snapped, hastily brushing a six-armed Tenvarik DeathBryde action figure under a pile of timesheets.

Behind him, Lucy leaned against the doorframe. She was wearing the same perpetual look of idiot disdain on her face as she always did. 'Who were you talking to?' The pink, thin girl was all angles, like she was skin and untidy clothes hung on a collection of rakes. Randall noticed vaguely that she had done something different with her hair, put it up and coloured it with what appeared to be poster paint. He couldn't even begin to fathom the things she did that women called fashion.

'I'm not taking to anyone,' he said, annoyed at himself for being

caught out. 'What is it?' Randall could feel the colour rising in his cheeks,

and he grimaced. He refused to allow himself to be embarrassed.

Lucy shrugged. 'Some kid just threw up in the cereal aisle.' She

jerked her thumb at the corridors of products ranging away behind her,

towards the front of the supermarket.

'Fine,' he said. 'Is someone going to clean it up?'

Lucy was instantly affronted by the suggestion. ‘ *Ew.* Not me? You're

not actually asking *me* to mop up toddler puke?'

'You're not on the registers right now. Can you do it?'

'I'm like, busy?' She waved her nail file at him and then returned to

work at the tips of her fingers. 'This is my break.'

He could have made it an order; but then the night shift had only just

begun and Randall abandoned the idea when he realised that he would

be forced to listen to Lucy whine and gripe about it for the rest of the

week, if not the month.

'Fine.' He shrugged on the electric blue vest that hung on his chair. It

was identical to the yellow one grudgingly worn by Lucy, with the big

Nev-R-Close corporate logo and goofy cartoon clock across the back;

but the colour set him apart. It showed his status. He smoothed the fabric

with the flat of his hand and adjusted the name-tag on his right breast,

which sat precisely at the regulation two-and-a-half inches over the

pocket, as certified by the company manual. HI, it said in black on gold,

I'M RANDALL. HOW CAN I HELP?

Next to the name-tag there were a row of pins, each one certifying him as qualified in a certain capacity. A red cross (he'd done the first aid course), a tablet (he had the pharmacy training, even though his store didn't have one), a chicken (he could deal with meat goods), a smiley face (for his qualifications in customer care), and a crescent moon (for the position of night manager). He admired them for a moment in the reflection of the motivational plaque on the wall, which had a pithy quote from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* emblazoned on it. The pins were like a seasoned campaigner's medals, earned in hard-fought battle. And one day, one day soon he would have the radiant sun badge, the one that he coveted. *Day manager.* And then he would leave the night-time world behind, and get back to the pace of the rest of humanity, not the vacant nocturnal experience that faced him now. *If I pass the evaluation. If Mr. Stukey at the regional office in Dekkerville doesn't decide to flunk me because he just doesn't like me very much.*

Randall sighed and got himself a mop and bucket. When he saw the mess that waited for him on aisle two, he realised he would need to breathe through his mouth. He went back for more absorbent paper.

When he was done, and everything smelled pine-fresh, Randall went

on patrol, crossing up and down the aisles. He turned cans of dog food so that they were racked face out. He adjusted the display boxes of window cleaning fluid into a more aesthetically pleasing position. He made sure each aisle glowed with good value.

Randall passed Yip and nodded casually to him. The Asian man nodded back, bending into the cooler to stack cardboard crates of light beer. Yip didn't talk very much, and Randall's few hamfisted attempts at conversation hadn't got very far with him. He had tried to engage the man on military history, a subject that Randall felt he knew well,

remarking that Yip's people 'had a noble warrior tradition'. Yip had commented that he knew little of that, because he was from Ohio.

Randall stopped at the end of frozen foods and tap-tapped a fluorescent strip-light that was flickering. It was important that the Nev-R-Close was always well-lit, so the company manual said. It made people comfortable to know that the mini-mart was flooded with illumination.

Nothing was unseen in here. It was all out in the open, in the glare of the humming tubes. He walked on. Of the sick kid and attendant parent there was no sign; he heard the ping-ping of the automatic doors open and close, and realised that once again the store was empty. But it was a Monday night, it was going to rain, and they were isolated out here on

the road to Route 45. Passing traffic to and from the freeway was rare at

this time of night.

His patrol concluded as he reached the registers and he saw Lucy,

still working at her nails, bent over a copy of *Fashionista*. She saw him

look at the magazine and frown.

'I'm gonna put it back on the rack,' she said, before he had a chance

to give the *this is not a library* and/or the *magazines are for customers*

only speech. But she made no move to do so.

Pepper was in her usual place at Register 2. At first she ignored him.

Randall watched her knitting. The heavyset woman's dark face was

forever in a scowl that she focused through the half-moon glasses on her

pug nose. He had no idea what the odd beige thing was that she was

making, but it never seemed to get finished. Pepper finally eyed him and

he reflexively looked in a different direction. Confrontations with her

never went Randall's way. He remembered the time he had casually

asked if Pepper was her first or last name, and she'd turned her bulk

towards him, intimidating him with her sheer size. ‘Jus' Pepper,' she had

said, eyes hardening. 'Not Doctor, not Sergeant, jus' Pepper, you

understand?' Randall sighed. If nothing else, the name fitted her acerbic

manner.

Register 3 was unoccupied, and Randall was about to demand why,

when the fourth member of his staff emerged blinking from behind a

stack of marked-down toilet roll.

'Sorry,' said the lank-haired youth, 'just had to hit the, uh, bathroom, y'know. Yeah.' He took his seat behind the till and ran a hand over his stubbled chin. A Slipknot T-shirt peeked untidily out from under his yellow vest.

Randall glared at him. 'You're taking a lot of toilet breaks recently, Arthur.'

'I'm, uh, no, it's okay. Sorry.' He wasn't sure if the answer was supposed to be an explanation or an apology, and Randall knew full well that the guy was sneaking outside to smoke. There were spots of wetness on his shoulders from the rain that had just started to drum on the windows.

'Hey,' Arthur began again, glancing at Pepper and Lucy. Was there, like, a delivery or something earlier?'

'Deliveries are Friday,' Pepper snapped, returning to her knitting.

‘No, see, 'cause there's this big crate outside. It wasn't there when I came in, y'know?'

'What are you taking about?' said Randall.

Arthur pointed through the windows. 'Right there. Big blue crate.'

He crossed to the rain-streaked glass and looked out. To his surprise, the stoner was quite correct. A large rectangular box, maybe ten feet high, was tucked in flush with the side of the mini-mart, beneath the

big

halogen flood lamp that illuminated the parking lot. Randall blinked. *How*

did that get there? I didn't hear a truck pull up.

He could just about make out something written on the side, but the

rain made it hard to see and as the downpour became fiercer, Randall

decided he didn't want to venture out for a closer look. He turned to face

his troops. 'Did anyone see that get dropped off? Anyone?' There was a

chorus of silence and Randall ground his teeth together. It was typical of

Louis, their often slapdash delivery guy, to do something like that. He

had probably deposited it there, and instead of getting one of them to

sign for it, just drove off and left. Randall chided himself; this was the sort

of thing that happened if you didn't stay on the shop floor all the time.

'Arthur?' He glared at the youth. 'Did you see what was on the crate?'

'Nuh,' came the reply. 'And, it's Art, man. My name's Art.' He tapped

his name badge, and Randall noticed that the HUR had been inexpertly

scratched away with something sharp, so now it said HI, I'M ART.

'Art,' repeated the young man, with a dull smile. 'Like, from a gallery.'

'You ever been to an art gallery, *Art*?' Randall replied snidely.

'They have that store over in Black Pine Mall with the dot pictures that

make a shape if you stare at them. Does that count?'

Lucy rapped her nail file on her register. 'Maybe you should ask that

guy about the crate.' She used it to point towards the magazine racks.

'He came in from outside, before.'

Randall looked and saw a slight, unassuming man wearing a tan

coat, and rather incongruously, a straw hat. He was bent at the knees,

scanning the wall of glossy publications, propping himself up on a

umbrella with handle shaped like a question mark. 'He's from

Englishland, I think.' Lucy added.

'England,' Randall corrected her automatically. He reached out and

retrieved the fashion magazine from in front of her and, ignoring the girl's

cry of annoyance, wandered over to the racks.

Randall dropped the copy of *Fashionista* back where it was supposed

to be and smiled professionally as the man in the hat glanced up at him.

'Hello,' he said, 'are you finding everything you need?'

The man got up, holding a magazine in his hand and shook his head.

'Actually, no.' The accent was interesting, more Scottish than English as

far as Randall could tell. 'I was wondering if you stock those bilious

yellow confections, sponge things with sugary icing on the top?'

‘Snackee Cakes?' This tourist hardly seemed the type for those. In

Randall's opinion they were a borderline health hazard, something

stewed out of chemical vats and pumped full of additives that made kids

go hyperactive just from licking them. But Nev-R-Close Incorporated didn't care if they were healthy or not, just as long as Randall kept them in stock. As he understood it, Snackee Cakes were made by a company who also specialised in fire retardants and weapons-grade defoliants.

'Um. They're over here.' Randall led the man to the correct shelf and watched him pull out armfuls of the product.

'Could you take this for me, there's a good fellow?' The man handed Randall the magazine he'd been holding and he glanced down. It was that month's issue of *Imperiad! The Games Journal of Emperors and Warrior-Kings*. On the cover was a lurid image from the newest expansion pack for *Blood-Swords of the Eleven Moons*. Randall had already read it; he was a subscriber.

'Are you a player?' he asked, suddenly delighted by the possibility that he had found a kindred spirit, all thought of the blue crate forgotten.

'Pardon?' The man glanced at the magazine. 'Oh, in a way, I suppose. Aren't we all?' He doffed his hat. 'I'm the Doctor, by the way.' He returned to his collecting.

'I'm_ the manager,' Randall replied, slightly nonplussed.

'Really?' He nodded at the magazine. 'Engaging in some amateur tyranny, are you?' He studied the name-tag. 'Randall?'

'I play *Lord General Online*,' Randall enthused. 'I have an Archangel-grade ranking. My tag is Master Randar.'

'Master? Delightful.'

'Oh yes,' he continued. 'And it's not easy to reach that level, you

know. To get that sort of ranking requires dedication and weeks of play.

You have to have a keen knowledge of strategy and tactics to be a

commander.' He smiled to himself. 'A leader.'

The Doctor glanced at him. 'Is that so? Is that how you measure

leadership... or management?' The man's eyes strayed to the staff at the

registers.

'I_ suppose so.' Something in the tourist's manner gave Randall

pause. 'You don't have a ranking, then?' He was disappointed to realise

that the man was yet another person who was unimpressed by his virtual

prowess.

‘To be honest, I just picked it up as some light reading. Thought I saw

an old friend on the cover. Probably just a race-memory pressing though

from the collective unconscious into the artist's mind, but you never can

tell...'

Randall glanced at the image of a Bane King Cyborg, one of the new

monsters introduced to the game world with the new expansion disc. It

had a blank metal face crested with angular silver hoops and it looked

like no friend that Randall would ever want to have.

The Doctor had all the Snackee Cakes there were now, and he

carried them over to the counter where the coffee machine was situated.

One by one, he began to open the packets, discarding the confections in

the trash, and smoothing the plastic wrapping into squares.

'Hey,' Randall began, 'You can't do that!'

'I'll pay for them, don't worry.' Distractedly, the Doctor handed him a

credit card. It was an American Express Diamond Card, a sliver of clear

plastic with the name DR JOHN SMITH laser-etched in the surface.

Randall had heard of the AmEx Diamond, but he'd never thought he

would see one. They were the retailer equivalent of a unicorn, something

spoken of in myth and legend; so the stories went, they had a limitless

spending capacity and were only issued to billionaires.

'We've got three more boxes in the back,' he said blankly.

'Oh, good, I'll take those as well, please.'

'What do you need the wrappers for?'

'The chemical combination of the styrene film in close proximity to the

tetrahydrosol, yellow dye 5, and disodium-ribonucleotide in the cakes

mimics a particular form of bioplastic found in the upper atmosphere of a

certain gas giant,' He spoke without taking a breath. 'You know how

expectant women crave particular foodstuffs during their pregnancy? I

have a mother-to-be who needs my help finding something to her tastes.'

He shuffled the plastic into a pile. 'A rather large, rather unusual

mother-

to-be...'

Randall had become lost after the word styrene and just nodded. 'I'll

get the rest for you, uh, Dr Smith.'

'Just Doctor will be fine.'

Randall asked Yip to bring out the other boxes of Snackee Cakes on

a trolley and take them up to the register. The rain was hitting hard now

and it came off the flat windows with a sound like someone throwing

handfuls of gravel at the glass.

Lucy ran the credit card through the reader, reading the name there.

‘So, you're kinda like a doctor?'

'Kind of,' admitted the man, with a wan smile.

'Oh, cool.' She leaned forward and showed him her hand. 'Listen, I

get this real sharp pain when I flap my wrist back and forth. What should

I do about it?' She demonstrated for him.

The Doctor mimicked her actions. 'I'd say don't flap your wrist back

and forth.'

'Right.' She nodded sagely.

The ping-ping of the automatic doors sounded, drawing Randall's

attention. Two men entered, both in heavy coats that were speckled with

rain. One had a close-cut fuzz over his scalp, the other had matted

brown dreadlocks. On some level he registered that they were nowhere

near wet enough to have walked in from down the roadway; they had to

have got out of a car. But he hadn't seen any headlights draw up, and

why would anyone want to drive up to the Nev-R-Close in the dark?

Tension spiked among them all and Randall felt it instantly. As he

expected, Skinhead went to the liquor stand and got himself a tall bottle

of some no-name generic vodka. Dreadlock wandered idly to the spinner

rack of comic books and twirled it, selecting an issue of *The Astounding*

White Knight to leaf through. It was the Doctor who noticed last, intent on

marshalling his odd purchases. Randall had the immediate sense that

the two new arrivals were waiting for the man to leave.

'Rough night, isn't it?' said the Doctor, in a way that made it clear he

was in no hurry to go.

Skinhead put the vodka bottle down in front of Arthur. He shot a look

at Dreadlock, and then grinned. 'Buddy, you got no idea.'

It happened so very quickly. Both men moved, their coats flapping

open with crackling noises like bird wings. Dreadlock had an fire axe that

came out from under his arm and he savagely smashed a gumball

machine, spilling brightly-coloured balls across the scuffed linoleum.

Lucy screamed and clutched at her ears. Skinhead brought up his fist

and in it was the tarnished silver frame of a massive revolver. He fired

twice into the air, blowing out a strip-light.

At any other time, Randall could have quoted chapter and verse about the gun, giving its make and model, what kind of bullets it used, where it was manufactured, but the fact that it was there in front of him, suddenly real and capable of killing, blanked that from his thoughts.

'Nobody move!' shouted Skinhead. 'All the money in a paper bag, right now or I start making corpses!' With his free hand he cracked the seal on the vodka and took a swig as Dreadlock raced back and forth, using the axe to behead all the security cameras.

'Just give them what they want,' said the Doctor carefully. He reached for a bag. 'Let me help you.'

Skinhead waved the gun around and Randall flinched each time it wafted towards him. 'Yeah! Help him!' Lucy made a kind of whining noise that was the precursor to bawling her eyes out, and Skinhead menaced her with the pistol. The moan died in her throat.

With robotic motions, Randall moved from register to register, opening the cash trays and bundling the various denominations of bills into a paper sack. 'Do you want the coins, too?'

‘No, we don't want the damn coins,' said Dreadlock. 'What are you, an idiot?'

He blinked. Now Randall thought about it, it was a dumb thing to ask.

'Is there a reason you're doing this?' The Doctor's question was mild and unassuming. 'You're taking a risk, you know. This could end very

badly for you.'

'Not as bad as it could for you,' Skinhead retorted. He glared at Randall. 'Hey, blue-coat. You're the manager, right?'

He nodded; it wasn't as if he could deny it with the vest he was wearing.

‘Gimme your keys.' Skinhead beckoned Dreadlock back over to the tills, and the other man spun the axe around and inserted it into his belt, as if it were a sword at his hip.

Randall complied and the metal ring was snatched from his hand. ‘Go get the security tapes and waste them,' Skinhead ordered, and his

partner dashed off into the back, towards Randall's office.

Skinhead smiled, and it was an unpleasant sight. 'Yeah. We're doing just fine. Nobody be stupid now, and nobody has to catch a bullet.' He rammed the gun in Arthur's face. 'Understand, you greasy little freak?'

Arthur nodded, trembling.

'I don't think you really need the money, do you?' asked the Doctor, as Randall moved to Pepper's register, gathering up the last of the cash.

His voice was utterly calm. 'You're not one of those men who convinces themselves they're doing something righteous by stealing from the big corporate entities. You're not even doing it to feed someone. You're doing it because you like to, isn't that so?' There was the shadow of a

grin on the Doctor's face, as if he was mirroring Skinhead's thoughts in his expression. 'You like the look on their faces. The power it gives you.'

Skinhead grinned back. 'You must be some kind of smart guy, pal. Yeah, you got me down pat.' The sounds of crashing and smashing issued out from the back of the mini-mart, as his accomplice wrecked the security video recorders that had captured the arrival of the two thugs.

Skinhead advanced on the Doctor. Wanna find out if you're smarter than a bullet?'

The little man showed no fear at all, not even the slightest tic or tremor. Randall felt it for him, though, his gut twisting and his knees turning to water. He put a hand on the side of the register to steady himself.

'Four hundred and seventy-six thousand, nine hundred and twenty-eight.' he offered.

'What?' demanded the thief.

'That's how many times I've had a gun pointed at me. Well, at least how many since I decided to start keeping count.' He shrugged. 'You get used to it after a while. At this point, would you like to pull back the hammer to underscore how serious you are? Like they do in the movies?'

Skinhead grinned. 'Maybe I'll just skip straight to the blowing-you-away part.' And then, as the Doctor predicted, he cocked the gun.

‘Ah, there,' said the man. 'That's impressive, isn't it? And you can't do that with non-ballistic weapons. It robs you of a whole extra level of drama if you're using a staser or something else high-tech.'

Dreadlock came back down aisle three, casually smashing Yip's carefully set stacks of canned soups and sauces with swings of the axe-head. He swigged from a bottle of beer, draining it with a belch as he reached them. 'S'done,' he said. He threw the bottle and it skittered off across the floor.

The tills drained of funds, Randall gingerly proffered the paper bag to Skinhead, who snatched it from his grip, laughing as he made him flinch.

'Destructive actions always describe a downward path,' the Doctor glanced at Randall as he spoke, as composed as if they were talking about the drumming rain outside. 'Every thug reaches zero eventually, no matter how large or small they are, no matter how commonplace or

grandiose their schemes.' In the little man's odd grey eyes there was a peculiar kind of anger, like a sense of cold and constant outrage that he was forced to share the world with people like the two criminals. 'But they never understand that.' He sighed, as though the weight of eternity was upon him. 'Not until it's too late.'

'Shut up,' Dreadlock said. 'Man, you're boring.'

Skinhead looked up from the bag and his features darkened. He swore, drawing an automatic tut from Pepper. 'What is this?' He demanded, waving a handful of five- and ten-dollar bills from the bag in the air. 'Is this some kinda joke? There's barely five hundred bucks here!'

‘Aw, no way.' Dreadlock's face fell. 'Man. Say it ain't so.' He spun the axe. 'You all give us what you got on you too, all of your stuff as well.'

'Oh yeah, like that's gonna make it up,' muttered the other man. He took another pull at the vodka. 'Don't be an ass.' He panned the revolver to point at Randall. 'Hey, you. You gotta safe in here, yeah? Open it.'

'I can't,' he told them. 'It's on a time-lock. And there's nothing in there, anyhow.' The words came out of his mouth in a tumble. Suddenly he was thinking about Mr Stukey and about how all of this would become his fault. Bad enough that these creeps had cleared out the registers, but if he gave them the safe too — which had everybody's pay for the month nestling inside it along with the store's float money — he could kiss his positive evaluation goodbye.

He wasn't about to let that happen; and abruptly he found himself recalling a *Lord General* game he had played some months ago against the guys from the Idaho league. They'd used elf-mage raider ships to loot his grain stores, and Master Randar had been forced to divert his dwarf hussars to frighten them off. He'd lost a lot of resource points along

the

way, but in the chat room after the game everyone had said what a cool

move he had made, bluffing the Idaho guys into backing down by telling

them he had twice the number of troops. *This is like that*, Randall told

himself. *I drew the line and dared them to step over, and they punked*

out. He puffed out his chest and remembered the assertiveness training

courses he had been on. 'You're not taking anything else here tonight, so

why don't you just go? The safe's not going to be opened, not by me, not

by my staff.'

'Randall,' the Doctor began, a warning in his voice.

‘No,' he said, ignoring the man and drawing himself upright with a

shaky breath. 'I'm not intimidated by you and neither are they.' The words

sounded good as they came out, although his voice was a little bit reedy.

'We are drawing the line here.'

'Is that right?' Skinhead said darkly, amused at the sudden display of

backbone.

‘Aw, hell no!' Pepper replied. 'What are you thinkin', Randall? Open

the damn safe, or they're gonna kill someone!'

Just like that, his fantasy of facing down the thieves evaporated.

'Pepper, you're supposed to back me up!' He groaned. 'You're my staff,

you're supposed to do as I say! I'm your leader! Remember the team-

building exercises we did?'

'You ain't the boss of me,' said the woman, with damning force. 'Not with my hide on the line, you ain't!'

'Yeah,' Arthur chimed in. 'You should just give them the money, Randall.' Yip and Lucy were nodding in agreement as well.

Randall looked to the Doctor for support and the man gave him a slight shake of the head.

Pepper made the tutting noise again. 'Why don't you quit worrying about what head office is gonna think of you? That's all you ever care about, ain't it?' She waved her hands about. 'Look around! That pop-eyed creep Stukey and his bottom lines and rulebooks ain't here, we are!'

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. Didn't they understand? Didn't they get it? He was in charge, and that meant they were supposed to follow his lead. *Do as I say. Follow my orders. Point and click, just like the game.* They were not supposed to disagree with him.

He started to speak, but the ping-ping sound of the automatic doors opening interrupted him. Everyone turned to see a figure in biker leathers and a silver half-helmet enter the store. With the rain and all the confusion, no one had seen him approaching.

'Hey,' the motorcyclist began, 'You got any —'

Skinhead shot him.

The report of the pistol seemed louder than the earlier gunshots. In the moments afterward, as the hapless biker flailed backward against a shampoo display and collapsed, Randall realised that the slick leather jacket and silver helmet made the man look like a highway patrolman. The thief had jerked the trigger on impulse, afraid they had been caught by the cops.

The biker crumpled into a heap, and the Doctor raced to his side, unzipping the jacket. 'There was no need for that!' he shouted, furious. 'No need at all!'

Tears streaking her flushed face, Lucy dragged the green emergency first aid kit out from under her register and handed it to the little man. He tore it open and emptied the contents on the floor, sorting through the items for what he needed.

Dreadlock admired the aftermath. Tang,' he said with a smirk. 'That was unlucky. Buddy here shoulda kept on riding, stopped somewhere else for his smokes.' He chuckled at his partner. 'You too bad, bro.'

'I am at that.' Skinhead shrugged off the moment and returning his attention to Randall. 'Didn't plan that, but it's fine. Now. Where was we?'

'The safe,' said Randall in a dead voice. He could barely breathe. The air was heavy with the stink of blood and cordite.

'That's right,' came the sing-song reply as Skinhead gestured with the gun. 'Randall here was telling me how he wasn't going to be opening the

safe.'

Dreadlock leered at him. 'Had a change of mind, Randy-wandy?'

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'Please!' cried the Doctor. 'I need help! This man is going to die unless someone helps me!' He shot a look at Randall. 'You know first aid. Come here!'

'The safe — ' Dreadlock began, but the Doctor spoke over him.

'Right now you're only guilty of armed robbery and grievous bodily harm,' the Doctor said. 'Unless you want to make it murder, you'll wait a moment!'

'He's gotta good point,' said Skinhead. He waved Randall away. 'Go on then. Patch that loser up. You got a minute. Then we're going to be wantin' all the money.'

Randall shuffled across the room to the Doctor's side, half in a daze. Everything suddenly seemed unreal. *Like the game,* he thought. *But I don't like this level. I need to stop playing and reload it, do it over.*

The bloody ruin of torn flesh he saw inside the biker's jacket made his stomach rebel and threaten to empty itself over the linoleum. Colour drained from Randall's face and he choked, trying to breathe through his mouth.

'Press here,' said the Doctor quietly, using his hands to staunch some of the bleeding. 'Can you keep yourself together, Randall? I need an extra set of hands to do this.'

'Yes, Doctor,' he replied thickly.

The man produced a device out of the pocket of his coat, something small and metallic like a cigarette lighter. Keeping his back to the others so only Randall could see what he was doing, the Doctor aimed the device at the biker's wound and it hummed, projecting a pencil of green energy that ranged over the torn skin. The flesh began to knot closed of its own accord, leaving a thin line of scarring.

'The bullet went straight through,' the Doctor said. 'It missed all the major organs and arteries. This man will be all right if he can get to a proper hospital.'

'What is that thing?' Randall whispered, staring at the small device. 'Where did you get it?'

'It's not important,' the Doctor said in a tone that implied he wouldn't take kindly to any further enquiries. 'Just do what I told you.'

Randall gulped, tasting metallic bile on his tongue. 'Why didn't they do what I told them? None of this would have happened if they had followed my orders.'

The Doctor eyed him. 'Those are people back there, not the avatars in your games. They have free will.'

'But I'm in charge,' he insisted, failing to keep petulance from his tone.

'Are you?' The Doctor glanced at the two thieves. 'What you have to understand is that there's no shortcut to leadership, Randall. You don't

start with that status, no matter what colour your vest is. You have to

have respect. Given and earned.'

Randall thought about Lucy, Arthur, Yip and Pepper. There wasn't a

great deal of respect going in either direction in his relationships with any

of them. Hell, he couldn't even get them to do their jobs most of the time.

What made him think he could get them to risk their lives?

The Doctor read his thoughts through the expressions on his face.

'Your people have to know they can trust you,' he continued, sealing the

biker's wound shut. 'Otherwise, it means nothing.' The man in the leather

jacket groaned and his eyelids fluttered.

'Okay,' called Skinhead. 'Time's up, Randall. What's it gonna be,

tough guy?'

'Tick tock,' snorted Dreadlock.

The Doctor nodded. 'It's all right. I can take it from here.'

Randall nodded, and got to his feet, walking back towards locked

room where the safe was concealed. Dreadlock followed him, tapping

the axe head on the floor with each step, marking out the distance.

Randall felt the blood on his hands and ripped open a packet of

disposable kitchen towels, rubbing the paper cloth hard over his fingers.

Dreadlock's eyes lit up when Randall spun the combination lock and

the safe door squeaked open. He gave the manager a shove and pawed at the wage packets and cash bundles, shovelling them into the paper sack. 'That's more like it!' He waggled the axe at Randall. ‘Ah, you shouldn't have held out on us, man. My buddy, he won't like that.' The criminal shoved him towards the door. 'And you shouldn't have talked back, neither. What? You think you're gonna be a hero or somethin'?'

'No,' Randall said in a small voice. 'I just made a mistake, that's all.'

'Bet you did,' He got another shove in the small of the back for his trouble. 'Keep walking, jerk.'

As they came back to the front of the store, Randall heard Lucy give a tight screech of panic. Skinhead was leering at her, invading her space.

'Hey, honey, don't be that way. I'm a rich man now, ain't I? I could treat you right.'

'Leave the girl alone,' said the Doctor.

'Shut your mouth, limey,' came the retort. 'You don't give the orders here. I do.'

The truth of that statement hit Randall hard. *I'm not in charge here. I don't think I ever was.* He shot the Doctor a look, where he sat crouched next to the pale, sweating form of the injured biker, and thought about what he had said. *Respect? Whatever made me think that Pepper and Arthur and all the rest of them had any respect for me?* A cold, sick feeling settled in his gut as he suddenly understood, really and honestly

understood, that there was nothing between him and his staff that could

even remotely be considered a bond.

And why? Because I treat them like game pieces. Because I don't think of them as people, just as staff. Numbers. Avatars. Disposable things, just like the soldiers in the games.

Randall blinked, trying hard to dredge up any memory of who these people actually were. What did he really know about them, aside from the jobs that he gave them to do? He tried to draw on old overheard conversations, things he recalled from their job applications, what they

wore and what they said.

Lucy has two sisters. She likes dance music and dogs. She wants to quit this place and work in a beauty parlour.

Arthur draws in his notebook when he thinks people aren't watching. He doesn't have a girlfriend and he's worried about his father, who is in the hospital.

Yip is smarter than he lets on, and he's always reading. He's doing a correspondence course towards getting a veterinarian's qualification.

Pepper likes country music and is allergic to garlic. She has a son in the army and she doesn't like anyone to know that she cries at sad movies.

It shocked him to realise he knew that much, and Randall also realised that there would be more if he dug deeper. But he'd been

ignoring it all, dismissing them as beneath his interest. They were his staff, not his friends. Why should he care about their lives?

How could I have done that, thought that, and then expected them to do what I say? He reeled from the sudden rush of self-knowledge, and Randall felt disgusted with himself.

'Time to go, I reckon,' Skinhead was grinning widely as the size of their haul. He peeked in the sack of money and bobbed on his feet. 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your co-operation.'

Dreadlock laughed. 'Have a nice day.'

And then Skinhead aimed the gun in Lucy's direction. 'C'mon, then, sweetcakes. You're coming with us. We're gonna go for a ride.' Lucy whimpered as the man hove towards her.

'Leave her alone!' The Doctor was on his feet, in time to be pressed back by the head of Dreadlock's axe. 'You don't need a hostage!'

'Don't tell me what I need!' shouted Skinhead. He licked his lips. 'And she won't be no hostage. She's going to be our travelling companion, ain't that right?'

'Oh yeah.' Dreadlock let out a girlish falsetto giggle.

She likes dance music and dogs. Randall moved without really thinking about it, placing himself between the girl and the armed man.

'No,' he told him, in a flat, firm voice. 'She's not going anywhere with you.'

'Randall, you got a short memory,' said Skinhead 'You just forgot the lesson I taught you.' The gun's barrel rose to his eye level. 'You forgot

that I got three more rounds in this thing!'

'You have all the money,' Randall told him. 'Take it and go. You're not

taking her.' He glanced around, scanning the faces of the others. They all

had questioning looks, they were all surprised. Me too, he thought. 'This

is Lucy,' he said aloud. 'She's got a life and a future planned out, just like

everyone here, and I'm not going to let someone like you steal that away

from any of them. Just take the money and go.' Lucy blinked, her head

jerking up to stare at Randall.

The revolver pressed into his neck. 'You piece of crap,' Skinhead

spat. 'You think you're gonna stop me?'

'She's part of my staff,' Randall replied. ‘I'm responsible for her.'

'You ain't gonna take her.' Pepper echoed his words in a growl and

got to her feet, drawing herself up to her full and quite imposing height.

Arthur followed her lead and stood as well. ‘Y-yeah,' he said, fighting

down a tremor in his voice. 'Just get lost!' He nodded to Randall, the

gesture asking Is that okay? Randall nodded back, his defiance

strengthened.

'You heard the manager,' Yip moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder

with Pepper. 'Take a hike.'

'I'm gonna kill someone!' Skinhead was red with anger.

'I don't think you are,' said the Doctor. 'I think this has gone as far as anyone is going to let it. Isn't that right, Randall?'

'Yes,' he replied. He kept his hands bunched in fists to stop them from shaking. Randall had never been as terrified in his life as he was at this moment; but he couldn't fold now. The sense of it, the complete rightness of what he was doing, it filled every corner of him.

This was leadership; to face adversity and not back down, not because of arrogance, but because you were afraid. The others saw that too, and they followed him, not out of obligation, but because it was the right thing to do.

Skinhead's voice dropped to a low growl. 'I could blow you away. You really willing to let that happen, just to protect some trailer trash skank?'

'Her name is Lucy,' he repeated, 'and like everyone else here she's worth a hundred of you.'

The automatic door ping-pinged and let in a gust of cold air and rain.

'Hey!' called Dreadlock as he moved away. 'Forget this, man. We got the green, let's jet. She ain't so pretty anyhow.'

Skinhead seemed liked he was going to argue, but then he turned away. 'Yeah. Whatever.'

Randall breathed a sigh of relief; and in the next second the revolver spun round and crashed into the bridge of his nose, the bone and

cartilage snapping wetly. He fell to the floor, blood spattering on the aisle

as the raiders took their spoils and left.

Placing him in Lucy's chair, the Doctor bandaged up his nose using

tape from the first aid kit. He was distantly aware of red and blue strobes

blinking through the rain-slick windows. 'The cops?'

The man nodded. 'And an ambulance for our poor friend over there.'

He sighed. 'I don't usually do this kind of doctoring, you know.'

'What kind of doctor are you, then?'

He eyed him. 'Let's just say that my skill set is geared more towards

the adjustment of things rather than the fixing of them.'

'I don't follow you.'

'What is broken takes a long time to heal, Randall. But what has yet

to break can be carefully turned to a better position.' Holding the small

metal device hidden in the cup of his hand, he ran it over Randall's

busted nose. The green light felt itchy and warm on his skin, and he

could feel the fragments of bone beneath moving and resetting

themselves. He almost asked again what the device was, but stopped.

The guy had an AmEx Diamond Card. He probably had all kinds of cool

stuff that Randall had never seen before. 'You're not exactly the sort of

customer we usually get here,' Randall said nasally.

The Doctor inclined his head. 'Oh, you'd be surprised.'

He considered that for a moment. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

'For what?' The other man put the device away and pushed back his

hat with a finger. He sighed heavily. 'I didn't do very much, did I? People

still got hurt. Wrongs still got done.' He nodded at Randall. 'You did the

right thing more than I. You and your friends.' The Doctor stepped back,

frowning, and glanced at the bags of plastic wrapping he had paid for. 'I

came here just as an aside, you know. A momentary diversion, an

ellipsis in the pattern of a larger story. But sometimes it's easy to forget

that this is what the universe is made up of.' He looked around the mini-

mart. 'Ordinary things. Ordinary people in ordinary places, standing up

against ordinary dangers and ordinary horrors. You can lose track, and

think that it's only the greater scale of things that matters. The turning of

galaxies and the death of suns. Events of cosmic import. But the truth is,

everything matters.'

Randall felt a pang of empathy for the man. In that moment, he

seemed terribly lonely.

'I have to go,' he said finally, gathering up his bags. 'Goodnight,

Randall.'

'Doctor,' he said, and the little man halted by the remains of the

gumball machine, pausing to help himself to a nickel jawbreaker from the

shattered bowl. 'You did help. You gave me some insight.' He glanced

away, to Lucy and Pepper and the others where they stood speaking to a

police officer. 'About what's important.'

But when Randall looked back, the man was gone.

On Friday, Louis arrived in the big tractor-trailer with the Nev-R-Close

logo emblazoned on the side. He offered the delivery chit to Randall, but

Arthur intercepted it and took the clipboard from his hand.

'S'okay,' said the young man. 'I got this, boss. I'll check the stock in.'

'Oh,' Randall said, pleasantly surprised. He couldn't recall being

called boss before, and on other days it would have taken at least five

minutes of insistent cajoling to get the youth to do the task. 'Thanks, Art.'

The lank- haired youth wandered off to join Yip at the loading dock.

Randall walked and Louis trailed behind him. 'Hey, Lou, I wanted to

ask you something.' He described the odd blue crate that he had seen on

the Monday night, just before the robbery. 'Do you know anything about

it?'

'Blue?' The driver shook his head. 'We don't use any blue crates. You

sure it was that colour? There was nothing on the schedule for this store

on that day.'

'I'm sure,' Randall said. 'It was right there. But you know what's

weird? After talking to the cops and all, I didn't get a chance to go look at

it until the next day.' He frowned. 'When I got there, it was gone.'

Louis shrugged. 'Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe whoever left it came

back and got it. It happens, y'know.'

'Maybe.' Randall wasn't convinced.

'But anyhow.' Louis adjusted the greasy cap on his head and grinned

with a wide, tobacco-stained smile. 'Tell me about the robbery! Was it

like the wild west or something?' He pointed at the hastily-patched pieces

of white acoustic tile on the ceiling where the shots had struck home.

'It was pretty scary,' he said. 'But we pulled together.' Pepper threw

Randall a nod as they walked past her register; he'd given Lucy the rest

of the week off and Pepper hadn't complained about having to pick up

the slack. The beige thing still lay on her lap; it seemed longer than the

last time he had seen it.

The driver rubbed his chin. 'Well, word to the wise, bud. I was at the

store over in Tallbush? I heard there that Stukey is mad as hell about

what happened. He's gonna be coming by personally to, uh, debrief you.'

'Let him,' Randall replied. 'I don't care what he says. Cash isn't more

important than people.'

Louis raised his eyebrows. 'Hey, whatever you say, man.' He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a rolled-up games magazine. 'Let's talk about something more important. Have you heard the rumours about the new content they're programming in for the release of Lord General II?'

'More goblins? I know you love playing goblins.' Louis was a unimaginative and somewhat poorly ranked player, but he made up in enthusiasm what he lacked in battlefield proficiency.

'No, better than that. They got a new character class — the tempus mage!' He flipped the magazine open and stabbed at a page, pressing it into Randall's grasp. 'They can flip back and forth into the past or the future. Cool, huh?'

Randall grimaced and tossed it back to him. 'Time travellers?' His hand went absently to his nose and rubbed the faded swelling there. 'That's the dumbest idea I ever heard.'

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The Spindle of Necessity

Allyn Gibson

An adventure of the Sixth Doctor

Introduction by Michaelean Ferguson, PhD

A cache of ancient papyri discovered during an archaeological dig in Serbia in March 2007 provided historians with their first look at the lost Aristotelian dialogue, 'Eudemus'. Though known as a writer of philosophical treatises, Aristotle also wrote a number of now-lost Socratic dialogues, and it was the treatises, thought to have come from lecture notes taken by students at his academy, the Lyceum, that were translated into Arabic and rediscovered by the West at the time of the Crusades. While the treatises reflect the division between Aristotle's mature philosophy and that of his teacher Plato, scholars believed the dialogues reflected the thinking of the young Aristotle, written in imitation of Plato's own dialogues.

The recovery of 'Eudemus, or On the Soul', presents a number of problems to the accepted understanding of Aristotle's works. By Socratic standards, the dialogue is unconventional. Traditionally, Socrates is present in the dialogue as the major participant, while Aristotle's 'Eudemus' occurs after Socrates's death and features Plato as its primary character. The Plato presented in 'Eudemus' differs markedly from the sage in the Aristotelian canon — one prone to doubt, flawed reasoning, and flights of fancy. Uncharacteristically, 'Eudemus' features several scenes, as one would find in a play. Perhaps, like Plato's sequence of dialogues covering the arrest and trial of Socrates, 'Eudemus' comprises several distinct works that follow in succession,

with only the first entitled 'Eudemus'.

Unlike the Platonic dialogues, the titular character is not present throughout the work, disappearing halfway into the dialogue with no explanation. Rather, much of the interest of 'Eudemus' revolves around a character known only as 'the Doctor' instead of by a proper name. Who was this Doctor? 'Eudemus' describes a wise man, seemingly ancient despite apparent youth. The dialogue makes no mention of a place of origin, and while the Doctor is met in ancient Egypt he seems to have retired there from places unknown. The Doctor is a singular character in the dialogue, prone to making bizarre claims about his nature, his life experiences, even his age. The Doctor's dialogue is insightful if somewhat fanciful, and he remains the unidentifiable enigma at the heart of 'Eudemus'.

The dialogue utilises concepts that were unknown at the time of the manuscript's composition. Some words are transliterated from the ancient Greek to English because we have no idea what Aristotle actually meant by them. Other words are translated to give a poetic flavour to the translation. Curiously, some words, if ordered differently,

suggest theoretical concepts that would not be discovered for two millennia and, if placed into a modern context, would accurately describe

a thoroughly modern understanding of the universe.

Despite these issues, the discovery of 'Eudemus' adds a new work to the Aristotelian canon. 'Eudemus' presents new insights into the biography of Plato and sheds light onto the mystery years of Plato's life in the immediate aftermath of Socrates's suicide.

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EUDEMUS, OR ON THE SOUL

i.

PLATO: The Egyptians are a strange people, civilised in their own way, but with a variety of gods and devils that would confuse even those of the Olympian pantheon. What knows Zeus of Osiris or Horus or Sutekh? These names confuse me, and we see them not in our histories of Atlantis or Troy.

EUDEMUS: Surely you know your Herodotus. Then you must know, friend Plato, that the Egyptians are an older people than we of Greece. Even our enemy, the Persians, have a history deeper than ours.

PLATO: True. Our Greek civilization is young compared to theirs, yet the Greek worships not the gods of the Persian or the Egyptian. Their gods are not our gods.

EUD.: Perhaps their gods are similar to ours, having the same wants and desires as our gods. Perhaps what we name Zeus the Egyptian names Osiris. Can these not be the same gods, merely under different names?

PLATO: I concede that you may be correct. Yet, consider the tales we heard days past, the stories of Atlantis and Troy. This storyteller knew Atlantis by the same name as we. He knew Troy by the same name as we. He is Egyptian. We are Greek. If we two peoples may know our histories by the same names, surely we must know the gods by the same names as well?

EUD.: Do we know our histories by the same name? Who is to say that the Egyptian did not hear the tale of Troy from a passing Greek? Did not Socrates's friend Critias learn the tale of Atlantis here in Egypt? We do not know that these histories exist independent of one another.

PLATO: Then these traditions do not exist separate from one another?

EUD.: I submit we cannot know for certain. If my supposition is correct, then both Greece and Egypt may in time have separate

traditions of Atlantis and Troy as these stories are passed down from

historian to student, generation to generation. Just as Critias told Socrates of Atlantis, and he taught you of Atlantis, so too will you teach another of Atlantis. Likewise, the Egyptian tells his student of Atlantis, and he will tell his student, and so on. Thus will two traditions form — one Greek, one Egyptian — of the same tale, yet both springing from a single source.

PLATO: Again, friend Eudemus, I must concede that you could be correct. Your supposition had not occurred to me.

EUD.: What seek we here, Plato?

PLATO: You know the Street of the Gods in Athens?

EUD.: I visit it often seeking knowledge.

PLATO: Have you found knowledge?

EUD.: On occasion.

PLATO: I must confess. I am not a pious man.

EUD.: Was that not the crime for which Socrates was put to death? The crime of impiety?

PLATO: It is.

EUD.: Then why have we come here?

PLATO: Knowledge. You sought knowledge from the oracles. Consider: How do we know that the Greek gods are true?

EUD.: They are true because we are taught they are true from our boyhood.

PLATO: You have never questioned the truth you are taught.

EUD.: I have not.

PLATO: Have you reason for believing the Greek but not the Egyptian?

EUD.: I have been taught the Greek is true. Of the Egyptian I have been taught nothing. Therefore, I do not know whether the Egyptian may be true or not.

PLATO: Because you have not been taught?

EUD.: Because their gods are unknown to me.

PLATO: Shall we not listen to these mystics, then? Perhaps we may learn something from them.

EUD.: Why should we listen to this mystic's tale? Does a tale of a prophet named Issek tortured on wooden racks for venerating his god with pottery further our knowledge?

PLATO: Is knowledge not its own end?

EUD.: What good is it to have knowledge if one does not act upon that knowledge or if the knowledge is not useful? I may know the numbers of stars in the sky or grains of sand in the ocean, but how is such knowledge to my benefit? Likewise, I may know how to stop the bleeding of a wound, but unless I am called upon to use that knowledge it is useless to me.

PLATO: You raise valid questions, friend Eudemus. Must knowledge have a use to be valuable, or may knowledge as an abstract have value?

EUD.: I submit that the former has greater weight than the latter.

Utility is more important than the theory.

PLATO: Consider this mystic.

EUD.: This old man? He appears feeble and is strangely attired for an Egyptian. Yet he is clean-shaven in their style, and his white hair is pulled back in an unusual fashion. His hand bears a blue ring. Why should I consider him?

PLATO: He claims to be a magician.

EUD.: Have we not magicians in Athens?

PLATO: We do. Yet his Egyptian magic may be different than the Greek. We should observe then consider whether he may impart knowledge.

EUD.: We shall do as you suggest.

MAGICIAN: Travellers! What do you seek?

PLATO: You are a magician?

MAGICIAN: I am. I have powers over both life and death. Shall I demonstrate?

EUD.: We should like that.

MAGICIAN: I shall restore this dead creature to life. This morning it was a living chicken. Now, it is a lifeless object. Do you agree?

PLATO: By my sight it is dead.

MAGICIAN: Then I shall build a box on this table. Observe as I place my panels as such. Now I place the lifeless thing within its sides. Now

I

seal it with this lid. Observe! Is the box sealed?

EUD.: The box is sealed.

MAGICIAN: Then I shall utter the words that have been passed down

from master to pupil for generations and restore this dead creature to life.

Damvar! Allocar! Razzam!

EUD.: The smoke! The flash ˚flight! How have you done this?

MAGICIAN: Observe, friends! The lifeless creature breathes again!

PLATO: A spry creature it is indeed, magician. Shall we catch it

before it vanishes into the crowd?

MAGICIAN: It concerns me not. I can buy another. You are Greeks?

EUD.: We come from Athens.

MAGICIAN: Why do two Greeks venture so far into Egypt?

PLATO: We seek a magician and the knowledge he offers.

MAGICIAN: How may this humble servant be of assistance?

PLATO: How did you learn this ability, to restore dead creatures to

life?

MAGICIAN: It is a secret passed down through time. I have travelled

far, I have seen much, I have learned much in my journeys. Now I am old

and weary. I no longer wish to journey as I did in younger days. I wish

merely for the chance to offer my abilities to those in need of them.

PLATO: Eudemus and I have undertaken a quest. I seek to return

one of the dead to the realm of the living.

MAGICIAN: You wish to bring a man back from the dead?

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PLATO: I do.

MAGICIAN: What you seek will be most difficult, perhaps even beyond my meagre abilities. The animals are easy. But a man? I make no guarantees. Nor will my fee be insignificant for the service.

PLATO: I would expect no less.

STRANGER: Keep your money where it is, Athenian. The only guarantee you shall receive from this charlatan is that a fool and his money are easily parted.

MAGICIAN: Charlatan? Surely not! Who are you to accuse me thus? You disrupt a business transaction made in good faith.

STRANGER: Good faith? You engage in trickery and call it 'good faith'? Your definition is lacking.

MAGICIAN: I restored life to the chicken. How can I be a 'charlatan' when I do as I say I would do?

STRANGER: You no more brought that chicken back to life than I am the Pharaoh.

PLATO: Yet I saw this magician take a lifeless chicken and restore it to life.

STRANGER: What you saw was nothing more than a cheap parlour trick. One performed poorly at that.

MAGICIAN: Lies!

STRANGER: Observe, Greeks. I topple his table.

EUD.: A false bottom!

STRANGER: Indeed. Sleight of hand. The cloth covered a false bottom beneath the tabletop, and the pyrotechnic display masked the substitution of the live chicken held beneath the table for the dead chicken in the box above. Am I correct, magician?

MAGICIAN: I admit nothing.

STRANGER: See, Greeks? His own words condemn him. When confronted with his own perfidy he cannot admit to his actions.

PLATO: You have saved me from a mistake, stranger.

STRANGER: It is nothing.

EUD.: Should we stop the charlatan as he runs? Should we not report him to the officials?

STRANGER: Whatever for, Athenian? Look about you. All these vendors are charlatans of one form or another, selling their wares to the unwary, taking the money and baubles of the poor, claiming they can work magic. The only difference about this magician is that he was caught in his activities. You will not see him tomorrow, I wager, but come again in two days and you will find him here, this very spot, performing the same trick, dazzling the same audience. The officials have better things to do than to pursue such a pointless crime.

PLATO: You are cynical, stranger.

STRANGER: I have seen too much to be anything but cynical.

PLATO: Where are you from? You are clearly not an Egyptian.

Neither do you have the air of the Greek or the Persian about you. Nor can I place your accent.

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STRANGER: Do not mistake my prevention of a grievous error on your part with any desire to engage with you in conversation on mine.

PLATO: Will you at least accept our thanks? You have saved us from squandering our funds on this charlatan and his tricks.

STRANGER: Unnecessary. Not everyone has a careful eye along the bazaar. What things appear to be and what they are differ markedly. Keep your wits about you.

PLATO: I am on a quest to gain knowledge. I could use someone with your wisdom.

STRANGER: You are Plato. You have wisdom enough of your own.

PLATO: You know my name, stranger. Will you at least tell me yours?

STRANGER: I am known as the Doctor.

ii.

EUDEMUS: Why have we returned to the bazaar, friend Plato?

PLATO: Perhaps we shall find the Doctor here amidst the patrons of the street.

EUD.: Why do we seek him?

PLATO: I believe he would be of invaluable help in our quest.

EUD.: To bring a man back from the dead?

PLATO: The same.

EUD.: Has man ever returned from the dead?

PLATO: Consider what Socrates spoke to Cebes on the eve of his death on the subject of the soul. 'There comes into my mind an ancient doctrine which affirms that they' — it is the soul here that Socrates speaks of— 'go from hence into the other world, and returning hither, are born again from the dead. Now if it be true that the living come from the dead, then our souls must exist in the other world, for if not, how could they have been born again?'

EUD.: How can we know that Socrates's proposition is correct?

PLATO: Does not the maggot come from the decaying body? Does not the butterfly come from the dying caterpillar?

EUD.: These are true.

PLATO: Can we not say that life comes from lifelessness, a great cycle from birth to death to rebirth?

EUD.: Let me ask you this — whence goes the soul after death?

PLATO: If the gods dwell in the heavens, as our myths tell us, then I submit that the soul must ascend into the heavens to rejoin with the gods that created it. Upon rebirth, the soul returns from the heavens and is reborn to the infant to grow into adulthood.

EUD.: Your conclusion leaves me uncertain. It does not seem provable to me. At most we can say that in some circumstances life comes from lifelessness. Nor can we say for certain that souls ascend

and descend. I am uncertain if we can say that the process that creates maggots and butterflies from the dead is the same process that gives to an infant a soul that had once been in a man.

PLATO: I accept your uneasiness. But consider! Did not the magician

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say in days past that he had seen much in his travels? Can we not say that his knowledge may be greater in areas than our knowledge?

EUD.: We can say that. But was he not unmasked as a trickster? How can we say that what he purported to be knowledge was in fact truth? If his demonstration was a lie, then how can we know that he knows anything that was not also a lie?

PLATO: He was indeed a trickster. One can only trick the unwary, therefore the magician must have knowledge greater than those who would observe him. Indeed, did not the magician trick us, and were we not wary? If he could trick us, surely his knowledge in some areas surpasses ours. Can we not say that the man who revealed the trickery must have a knowledge even greater than the trickster?

EUD.: I believe we can say this. The Doctor saw through the trickery where we did not.

PLATO: For that very reason we seek the Doctor. He knows things we do not know. He can help us to answer Socrates's maxim.

EUD.: Is that not the Doctor?

PLATO: It appears so. Look at how he towers above the others on the street. Look at his long blond hair and how it falls curling across his shoulders. Only one so secure in himself would allow himself to be seen in such an unkempt fashion and in such garish attire.

EUD.: Observe, friend Plato. Does it not appear that the Doctor himself seeks knowledge from the priests? Then may he lack the knowledge you seek?

PLATO: Yet did we not days past observe the magician to gain knowledge? Even Socrates, despite knowing much, did not know all. Can we not presume that the Doctor, too, knows much but not all?

EUD.: We may presume that.

PLATO: Let us hear the things the Doctor hears and gain knowledge of our own.

PRIEST: The word of the mighty Osiris, whose word is truth, has passed from generation to generation. Today I speak the story of the extinction of the Utchat, what we call the Eye of Horus, and of the dimming of the moon on the day that the two brothers, Horus and Sutekh, met in battle. The mighty Sutekh, god of the desert, murdered the father Osiris. His brother Horus, god of the sky, sought revenge for their father's murder and challenged Sutekh to combat for their father's body. In the Valley of the Kings they met, in the shadows of the Pyramids. Sutekh called upon the desert and a mighty sandstorm blotted

out both sun and sky, depriving Horus of his powers.

PLATO: What is this, Doctor? Is this an Egyptian myth?

DOCTOR: It is a story from the *Book of the Dead*.

PRIEST: Judging Sutekh to have an advantage in the battle, Thoth came and removed an eye of Horus as both eyes were clouded by Sutekh's storms. 'I remove the thundercloud from the sky when there is a thunderstorm,' spoke Thoth. The storm raged at the thundercloud that Sutekh sent forth against the Eye of Ra, the sun itself. Thoth banished

the thundercloud from Ra's eye, and he returned the Eye — living and healthy and cleansed, perfect and without defect — to Horus. The thunderclouds henceforth came from a sickness in the heart of the Eye of Ka as it wept for its companion eye, that of the Moon. Thus is the Moon dimmer than the sun, for it was taken from Horus and then returned. Such is the word of the mighty Osiris whose word is truth.

PLATO: What manner of story is this?

DOCTOR: You have heard a tale, Athenian, that explains what the Egyptians believe about the sun and the moon. Horus and Ka, these are sun gods. In some legends they are different, while in other legends they are the same. The eyes of Horus are the sun and the moon. Sutekh dimmed both eyes. The sun is the eye removed by Thoth, the moon is the uncleansed eye. This is the mythology these people hold, this is their

explanation for the universe.

EUD.: Is it true?

DOCTOR: Is it any more true than your mythology of Apollo? Do you look upon the sun and say, 'That is the god Apollo as his chariot races through the skies'?

EUD.: There are many who do say such.

DOCTOR: Do you?

EUD.: It is what I believe.

DOCTOR: Do you also believe, Plato?

PLATO: I believe there are gods who dwell upon the heavens. Does that mean I look upon the sun and see Apollo? Does that mean I look upon the moon and see Artemis? I do not know.

DOCTOR: Why do you doubt?

PLATO: Our myths tell us the gods influence the affairs of man. Yet the sun and the moon are inactive, and beyond the measurement of time they have no influence upon our lives.

DOCTOR: That is a good reason.

PLATO: I must also consider this tale we have just heard. The Greek believes that the sun and the moon are gods. The Egyptian believes that the sun and the moon are the eyes of a god. Both stories cannot be true.

DOCTOR: Why must either be true? Could not the truth be a tale you have not yet heard?

PLATO: I confess, Doctor, I do know.

DOCTOR: You sought me out, Plato. I would know why.

PLATO: I have need of your wisdom.

DOCTOR: I am flattered. Why do you say I have wisdom?

PLATO: Your eyes are old, yet you appear no older than I.

DOCTOR: Why would you say I am no older than you?

PLATO: Your hair is blond, curly, and long. Your beard is dark, though still blond. Neither are streaked through with the white hairs acquired with age. Nor is your face weathered and wrinkled. I submit that you have seen no more than thirty-five years.

DOCTOR: I have seen many times those number of years.

EUD.: By your appearance, surely not.

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DOCTOR: Appearances may deceive the senses.

PLATO: That is true. Socrates taught our bodies are merely imperfect vessels. He also taught that the soul may return to live again. Could your soul have been reborn with a new vessel to bear it?

DOCTOR: I have only ever been the Doctor. I have never been another.

PLATO: How may your soul be older than your body, then?

DOCTOR: You know the butterfly?

EUD.: We do.

DOCTOR: Does not the butterfly begin life as another creature, the caterpillar?

EUD.: It does.

DOCTOR: Could not the same be possible for me? Might I have stages of life where, like the caterpillar, I transform into the butterfly?

PLATO: I have never known a man to transform in such a manner.

DOCTOR: The infant becomes the child. The child becomes the youth. The youth becomes the man. Are these not distinct stages of life?

Are these not transformations?

PLATO: They are. Yet I know of no transformation, save death and decay, after the youth becomes a man.

DOCTOR: Perhaps I am not a man.

EUD.: You have the shape of a man. You have the speech of a man.

DOCTOR: Yet, do you not agree that appearances may deceive? Are not your senses imperfect because they are physical and thus limited?

PLATO: I do. They are.

DOCTOR: Then must something that appears as a man be a man?

PLATO: No. The gods appear as men though they are not men.

DOCTOR: That is a good example.

PLATO: Then you are a god?

DOCTOR: I have met your gods, Plato. I am not a god.

EUD.: The gods? Are they like men, but not?

DOCTOR: If you mean, do the gods resemble men in countenance, then the answer is yes. If you mean, do the gods resemble men in personality, vanity, and weakness, then that answer, too, is yes. The gods are to us as we are to an insect. They are no more aware of us

than we are of the fly. Do not look to your gods, Plato, for they have no

interest in you.

PLATO: My only interest in the gods is to answer the challenge of

Socrates.

DOCTOR: Which challenge is that?

PLATO: Socrates said that he knew that he did not know. I, too, know

that there are things I do not know. Therefore, I shall find the answers to

the questions I have not yet asked because I do not know yet to ask

them.

DOCTOR: How shall you find those answers?

PLATO: I shall ask the gods myself.

DOCTOR: How would you ask the gods? Climb Mount Olympus? If

you wish to do so you should never have left Greece.

PLATO: The gods do not reside on Mount Olympus.

DOCTOR: Your mythologies state that they do.

PLATO: The mythologies are incorrect.

DOCTOR: If not Mount Olympus, then where?

PLATO: I seek the *axis mundi*.

DOCTOR: The axis of the world. The spindle on which the heavens

turn. Why?

PLATO: I intend to find the *axis*, scale it into the heavens, and look

upon the gods themselves.

DOCTOR: Do not the Greeks believe that the *axis mundi* is Mount Olympus itself?

PLATO: The *axis mundi* cannot be Mount Olympus as the heavens do not revolve around Mount Olympus. Therefore, Mount Olympus cannot be the spindle upon which the heavens turn.

DOCTOR: I will agree, the heavens do not rotate around an axis through Mount Olympus. Why do you believe there is an *axis mundi*?

PLATO: I am told, by those who know such things, the heavens revolve around a point in space to the north. I have no reason to doubt them. I am no astronomer.

DOCTOR: I assure you that your astronomers have told you truth. There is an axis, and from our perspective here in Egypt it lies to the north.

EUD.: You are certain?

DOCTOR: You have seen the Pyramids?

PLATO: Herodotus wrote of them. I have seen no feat of human endeavour so magnificent in my life. I cannot imagine the labour and expertise that went into their construction. How would one even conceive of such a thing?

DOCTOR: A man much as you conceived of such a thing as the Pyramids. While the methods may be beyond your understanding, be assured that the methods were understood and known by those who used them.

PLATO: No man may know everything, that is true. I need not have the expertise to build the Pyramids because I have no need to build the Pyramids, yet there are those who do know because they needed to know.

DOCTOR: Precisely.

EUD.: I must ask, why do you bring up the Pyramids? I fail to see their relevance to the *axis mundi*.

DOCTOR: Would it interest you to know that the Great Pyramid, the largest and most impressive of the Pyramids in the Valley of Kings, is oriented to the celestial north? The Egyptians have astronomical knowledge that far outstrips the Greeks'. The north face of the pyramid directly faces the north pole. It is about that point in space that the heavens turn.

PLATO: Would it not stand to reason that if there is a point in the

northern sky about which the heavens turn then there must be a point in the southern sky as well? The Pythagoreans claim the Earth is round, and if so then an axis through the Earth on which the heavens turn must terminate at points both north and south.

DOCTOR: Well reasoned.

PLATO: If the heavens turn about this axis through the Earth, then would it not stand to reason that the *axis mundi* would be located both

north and south? Could we not reach the pole — the word I believed you

used — and there find the *axis mundi*, the spindle on which the heavens

turn?

DOCTOR: Your reasoning is not without merit, Plato, but I must ask

you. Assuming you could find the *axis mundi* what would you expect to

find there?

PLATO: I would expect to find a route into the heavens. A hill, an

incline, perhaps even a tower. The heavens must rest upon some

support. One could scale the support, reach the heavens, and speak with

the gods.

DOCTOR: Pardon my amusement, but I have not heard such folly in

five hundred years! I knew a man — a thief by trade — who described

you as a moron. Socrates, too, for that matter, and your pupil Aristotle.

PLATO: Aristotle? I am unfamiliar with the name.

DOCTOR: You have yet to meet him.

PLATO: We are all morons, so says this man?

DOCTOR: I have seen little to convince me otherwise.

PLATO: You think my plan folly?

DOCTOR: It is madness. You proceed on the assumption that there is

an *axis mundi* to find. Have you ever met a traveller who has spoken of it

in his travels? Have you any reason beyond myth to believe it exists?

You could search the Earth a dozen lifetimes, Plato, and never find what

you seek.

EUD.: Is not Plato's reasoning sound?

DOCTOR: His reasoning for its location is sound. His reasoning for its

existence is not.

PLATO: Unless I see for myself, how may I be certain?

DOCTOR: You wish to speak with gods. You sought to hire a

magician to restore a man from the dead. What is it you seek, Plato?

What do you think the gods can give you?

PLATO: If my master Socrates was correct in believing himself to

possess a soul, indestructible, and if, upon his death, his soul was freed

from the confines of his physical body and returned to the heavens,

could I not induce the gods to return his soul to Earth in a new form?

Could I not bring the wisdom of Socrates back from the heavens? Is this

not a worthy goal?

DOCTOR: A worthy goal? How can you believe any of that? I thought

Socrates taught you a life of reason, but this goal of yours is a life of

madness! Where is your reasoning, Plato?

PLATO: Did Socrates not say that the soul, coming as it does from

the divine, is both eternal and immortal? Did Socrates not say that the

body, composed as it is of the physical elements, is impure and thus

inferior of the divine? Did not Socrates say that the soul, once freed of the constraints of the physical body, would return to its divine state, to be reborn in a new body?

DOCTOR: Socrates said all of these things, but that does not make them right. I could say that the Earth is a cube, but that would not make it so.

PLATO: Yet Socrates's reasoning is logical.

DOCTOR: I said to a young woman many years from now, 'Logic merely enables one to be wrong with authority.' Your logic is specious. You assume facts not in evidence. You draw conclusions from those assumed facts that cannot be borne.

PLATO: What facts are those, Doctor?

DOCTOR: You assume the mind has an existence separate from the body.

PLATO: How can it not? From cadavers we know that blood comes from the heart, that air comes into the lungs, that food goes into the stomach. Can you point to an organ and say, 'This produces the soul'?

DOCTOR: What of the brain? Did not Alcmaeon the Pythagorean suggest the brain as the seat of intelligence?

PLATO: Yet it appears to do nothing. When I love, I feel it in my heart. When I hunger, I feel it in my stomach. When I thirst, I feel it in my mouth. When I tire, I feel it in my eyes. If the brain seats intelligence, should I not feel these sensations in the brain instead of the body? Yet

the brain produces no sensation save one, that of pain.

DOCTOR: Just because you cannot observe a thing does not make it so.

PLATO: Nor do your assertions that I am incorrect make them so. If I am wrong, prove to me that I am wrong. But merely tell me that I am wrong? Where is your authority in such matters? My logic would suffice

for Socrates and he was the best and wisest man I have ever known. Should that not suffice for you?

DOCTOR: If I could offer you proofs you would understand I would. If I could offer you reasons you would accept I would give them. I have neither to offer. I have only the experience of lifetimes. You say I have old eyes. Is it not possible that they have seen more than you imagine?

PLATO: You have old eyes, true, but even the wonders you have seen do not dissuade me from my course. I seek the *axis mundi* and an audience with the gods.

DOCTOR: You mean to go, then?

PLATO: Nothing you have said convinces me I am wrong.

DOCTOR: If that is your decision, then I shall accompany you if you will have me.

PLATO: But you have called my plans madness?

DOCTOR: How could I refuse such a quest? I have walked halfway across the world and seen the wonders of China. I have seen three suns

rise at dawn. I have witnessed the births of stars and the deaths of

planets. If you mean to do this, then I see little choice. I will go with you

in search of the *axis mundi*. An adventure into the unknown? I am drawn

to that as a moth is drawn to flame.

EUD.: Why the change of heart?

DOCTOR: We all have our destinies. If Plato wishes to return and

fulfil his destiny, he could have no better companion than I. Some of us

have seen our destinies. I will help him find the *axis mundi*.

iii.

PLATO: Sailing master, what make you of this weather?

PYRRHO: I have been a trade ship master for many years, Master

Plato, and I have never seen seas so calm and wind so perfect. If I did

not know better I would say that the gods themselves had blessed us on

our journey.

PLATO: You do not believe in the gods, Master Pyrrho?

PYRRHO: I have travelled to many places and seen many things in

my thirty years at sea. The gods never explained anything, they were

merely stories, and I have seen nothing I could not take for natural.

PLATO: But what of that storm to the south? Is that natural?

PYRRHO: I do not know. It concerns your friend the Doctor greatly.

He has stood at the bow all night. Even in our near-moonless sky the

clouds could be seen. He watched them.

PLATO: We make good time towards them. They grow swiftly in our approach.

PYRRHO: Forty days have passed since we left Ethiopia. Since the shores fell from view we have not sighted land. For eight days the sky has been cloudless, and though the ocean has been calm strong winds drive us south. Though unnatural to you, I have experienced them before and they hold no terrors for me. Those clouds to the south, however, are unlike anything I have seen. They concern me as well.

PLATO: They have grown much since last night? I must confess, I have not the mind for such observations.

PYRRHO: They have indeed grown much overnight. Though I have not asked him, I believe that has concerned the Doctor greatly and has prompted his vigil at the ship's bow.

PLATO: He has seen much, and he may have experience with such things.

PYRRHO: I should tell you, Master Plato, the crew grows restless. I have heard rumours of mutiny.

PLATO: Then let us hope that the Doctor offers insight into these ill-looking clouds and matters aboard ship do not reach such an end.

DOCTOR: Nine hundred years, and I have never seen clouds the like of these. Grey-green they are, billowing much as a storm cloud, yet they have not the movement of a summer storm. Instead, they seem painted

on the sky like a fixed thing, and as we approach they grow larger in our

sight. Was it not at dusk that they were merely a hand in height from the

horizon? Now they reach a third of the way to the zenith. As we sail

further south, the more these clouds loom larger above us. In mere hours

they will blot the sun from our sight.

PLATO: Did you not think this voyage was folly?

DOCTOR: You run from your past, do you not? Your master Socrates

lies dead, the winds of politics in Athens shift, and you are no longer

welcome there, correct?

PLATO: These things are true. Do you also run, hence your

reluctance? You feared that this journey would bring to mind events long

buried in your psyche?

DOCTOR: I too run, Plato, but not from my past. It is my psyche that

concerns me. Things dwell within my mind I wish I did not know. You run

from your past, and in time the winds will shift in Athens once more and

you will return and escape your past. I run from something else. I run

from my future, and I will never escape it.

PLATO: No man knows the future, despite what the oracles of the

Street of the Gods in Athens may believe and proclaim to the gullible.

DOCTOR: I have met my future. A dark and evil future it was.

Curiosity and nobility were replaced with arrogance and greed.

Compassion was replaced with indifference. How could a soul become

so corrupt? How could a life dedicated to justice become so chaotic?

PLATO: Your words are incomprehensible. You cannot speak of

yourself, surely? While I do not believe entirely that you, like a caterpillar,

may transform into a new form, do you suggest that you will become

something different and anathemetical to everything that you are?

DOCTOR: I do not suggest it, Plato. I have met the man I will

become. I looked into his eyes, I saw the twisted thing I shall become.

With every fibre of my being I reject the Valeyard and all he stands for,

yet as surely as day becomes night I shall, in the fullness of time, meet

my destiny as the Valeyard. I hide from that destiny, Plato. Why should I

go forward in all my beliefs when I know some day I shall reject every

belief I hold dear?

PLATO: How can you look into another's eyes and see what you will

become? I do not understand.

DOCTOR: Are we not sailing across the seas? Are we not moving

from one point to another?

PLATO: We are.

DOCTOR: Imagine time is but another sea. Just as this boat sails

from Ethiopia to unknown shores imagine there are ships that sail from

tomorrow into yesterday.

PLATO: You suggest that time itself is like the sea? That one can move from place to place in time, from the time of Atlantis to times yet to be, just as one can move from place to place on this Earth?

DOCTOR: I say the very thing.

PLATO: I cannot conceive of a vessel that could traverse the seas of time.

DOCTOR: Neither could you conceive of how the Pyramids were

constructed, yet they were conceived by the mind of man and built by the hands of man.

PLATO: Yet no sight could convince me that one might journey into the future or past.

DOCTOR: Perhaps not. I could tell you of engineering stars and eyes of harmony, yet these words would mean nothing to you. Some things must be taken on faith instead of reason and experience. Experience tells you I have an ancient soul and a young body. My offered explanation is one you either accept on faith or reject on reason.

PLATO: But how can you say that you could look into this Valeyard's eyes and see your own future? He cannot be you.

DOCTOR: I tell you that he is. I travel in time, Plato. Just as we sail across this sea, I have traversed the vortex of time. On occasion I have met myself in defiance of the laws of time. My people captured me and

placed me on trial. The Valeyard was the prosecutor, and the fate of my

soul was at stake. Imagine that, to be prosecuted by the evil, twisted being I am to become! I triumphed and defeated the Valeyard's plan to possess my soul, but in so doing I came away with the certain knowledge of my own doom. In time, I will be that Valeyard. I will prosecute myself for crimes never committed. No man can escape his destiny.

PLATO: I do not understand your tale, Doctor, but did you not say in Egypt that you were not a man? Men have destinies, they are determined by the Fates. If you are not a man, perhaps you may escape

your destiny.

DOCTOR: I applaud your optimism, but it is misplaced. I will not escape my fate, just as we will not escape this oncoming storm.

PLATO: Why do you say that?

DOCTOR: Do you not see it? There, on the horizon? A land I know cannot exist.

PLATO: Then how can it be here?

DOCTOR: Something has drawn us here, Plato, and we meet our destiny on these unknown shores.

iv.

PLATO: Why did you order the ship to sail back to Ethiopia? You have stranded us in an unknown land with no means to return.

DOCTOR: By rights this land should not exist. We sailed due south

from Ethiopia. What verdant plain is this? Where are the glaciers?

Whatever force brought us here and created this land will hold the power

to return us to Greece.

PLATO: Stormclouds rage overhead, yet they bring no rain, and

Master Pyrrho's crew thought them unnatural. If these clouds are

unnatural, could not this land be unnatural as well? Could the *axis mundi*

be here?

DOCTOR: Is that reason or hope, Plato?

PLATO: Perhaps both? Perhaps this unnatural land is the base of the

axis mundi and from it rises the Spindle of Necessity. Can we not say

that air is a fluid like water? If the spheres of the heavens turn on the

Spindle, then might the turning of the spheres churn the air as a stone

tossed in a pond churns the water? Could not this storm be produced by

the very forces that turn the sky about us each day? If I am correct, then

these oppressive clouds must hide the *axis mundi* from our vision. If they

would clear we could see our way into the heavens and the gods

themselves.

DOCTOR: If you are correct and a spindle rises through the clouds to

rotate the heavens about us, then yes, a coriolis effect as you describe

would disrupt the atmosphere and cause the storms about us.

PLATO: Is this storm not the proof we seek? Does this not confirm

that the spindle exists?

DOCTOR: You have no proof, merely a theory that aligns with the

facts. But I tell you, I have seen the Earth from the heavens. No spindle

rises, nor do the heavens rest upon pillars. The stars and planets do not

turn on spheres about the Earth. The Earth is not the centre of the

universe. The Earth is but an object in space, just as the sun and the

moon and the stars are all objects in space, as solid as the Earth. That is

why this I name this quest folly, because it is predicated on assumptions

of the universal nature that are demonstrably false.

PLATO: Do you not see them? Do you not hear them?

DOCTOR: I see nothing. I hear nothing. Plato, why are you kneeling?

What are these shapes arising from the mists? You three are women,

taller than I am by half, suffused with an unearthly glow. What are you?

FIRST: Do you not recognise us?

SECOND: We have watched over you through time and space.

THIRD: You cannot escape us.

DOCTOR: Why do I hear ethereal echoes in your voices as though

your words were everywhere and nowhere? Why do I hear in your words

the language of Gallifrey?

FIRST: You are the one we sought, Doctor.

SECOND: Plato was merely a convenient actor to draw you into our drama.

THIRD: We are the Fates, and you must embrace your destiny.

DOCTOR: I do not accept you. You cannot be what you claim to be!

CLOTHO (FIRST): I remember your birth, Time Lord. I spun the cords of your life. I remember your mother. I placed my hand upon her swollen belly. I ran my fingers across her red hair. She was quite beautiful.

LACHESIS (SECOND): I measured out the cords of your lives. Some of the cords were long. Some were short. Some cords, Time Lord, are mysterious even to me for their endings and beginnings even I cannot see.

ATROPOS (THIRD): I have cut the cords of your life many times. I have many cords yet to cut. You cannot escape your destiny by hiding in this time and place.

DOCTOR: No! I have seen my destiny, and I refuse it!

LACHESIS: You would turn your back upon the man you once were, upon all the deeds you have accomplished? Why reject the man you are?

DOCTOR: I have lived my life for justice, and I will not see that life corrupted! I have seen the man I shall become, and I would rather turn my back on the life I have led than allow that man to come to be.

CLOTHO: What could we say to convince you otherwise?

DOCTOR: There is nothing you can say. I wish to live my remaining '-

)Tears in a life of tranquility!

LACHESIS: Then observe, Doctor. Arise, Plato and awake! Your

quest is at its end.

PLATO: What has happened? Who are these women?

DOCTOR: They claim to be the Fates, Plato, unlikely though I find

their claim.

PLATO: Observe, Doctor. The clouds above us part. What is that

becoming clear to my sight in the mists? A mountain rising into the sky,

stretching into infinity? Nothing I have ever seen has risen into the sky as

does that spire. Fates, I ask you! What is that?

CLOTHO: The mountain is the *axis mundi*, Plato. The spire you see is

the Spindle of Necessity rising into the heavens.

LACHESIS: Did you not seek this?

PLATO: I did, Fates, but such was not the entirety of my quest.

ATROPOS: No, Plato, it was not. And so we shall fulfil it for you now.

PLATO: Doctor, we are flying!

CLOTHO: We ascend into the spheres of the heavens, Plato.

DOCTOR: How is this possible? This is beyond all my experience.

LACHESIS: What do your senses tell you?

DOCTOR: My senses tell me that I rise into the sky. But I know that

the senses may deceive. As my senses tell me things I know cannot be

true, I must conclude that you deceive my senses.

CLOTHO: Can you not accept that your senses do not lie?

DOCTOR: I trust my senses, Fates, but I harbour a healthy scepticism.

LACHESIS: As all should, Doctor. Do we not approach the moon? If we were to step upon the moon might you believe the experience of your senses instead of the preconceptions of your mind?

DOCTOR: They are not preconceptions. Rather, they are knowledge based upon the experience of nine hundred years.

ATROPOS: Step with us onto the moon and decide.

PLATO: What is this place, Fates?

LACHESIS: You have seen the moon in the sky, yes? You stand upon the moon. Look into the sky and see the Earth. See, there? Greece. There? Egypt. There? Persia. No living man has ever had your perspective upon the Earth, Plato.

PLATO: The Earth appears to be curved, as if a ball in space, just as the Pythagoreans believe. Those pillars extending outward from the world from top to bottom must be the Spindles rising from the *axis mundi*.

LACHESIS: Indeed. They are the pillars upon which the heavens turn. The planets, the sun, the moon, the stars, each on its own sphere, turning in its own time and manner. Look to the west. What do you see?

PLATO: That bright light. That cannot be the sun, surely?

CLOTHO: It is, indeed.

PLATO: It appears so different.

DOCTOR: You see the light of the sun from an angle. Its light shines

not on you but on the Earth below. Is that not right, Fates?

ATROPOS: Correct.

DOCTOR: I have walked upon the moon many times. It never looked

thus. Is that not an edge I see? Does it not appear that we stand within a

convex bowl? Were I to walk the edge, would I fall into space? Will you

come with me, Plato, and see what lies beyond the moon's limb?

PLATO: We are the first to set foot upon the moon. Who would

believe this?

DOCTOR: I would not believe this. Even now I am not certain to trust

my senses. Here we stand at the edge of the moon. I peer over the edge

and I see the stars below. If I step out beyond the limb of the moon, what

will my feet land upon? Will I fall out into space and drift for eternity?

What do you think, Plato?

PLATO: Do not do it, Doctor!

DOCTOR: I have no fear. I have seen my destiny, and I know my

lives do not end in the empty void of this time and place. I step out, and

— Look at this, Plato! I stand upon what seems to be open space! Come,

Plato! You can walk upon open space as well. I look down at my feet and

see stars below. I stand upon the inner surface of the moon's sphere,

something I know to be impossible. Will not Claudius Ptolemy write that

the planets and stars are fixed upon crystal spheres turning about the

Earth?

CLOTHO: Why should the heavens not revolve around the Earth?

LACHESIS: Why should the universe as you know it remain fixed so?

DOCTOR: I walked the sands of worlds in galaxies beyond sight and

mind. I have flown through supernovae. I have witnessed the birth of

planets. The universe is vast beyond the comprehension of the mind. Yet

if I stand upon the inner surface of the moon's crystal sphere then the

universe cannot be so vast as I know it to be. The universe cannot

reconfigure itself on such massive scale. A geocentric universe cannot

become a cosmos in which Earth is merely one mote in the eternal night.

CLOTHO: Let us visit Mars, and perhaps you will reconsider the

experience of your senses.

LACHESIS: Look about you, Doctor. Is this the Mars you know?

DOCTOR: This is a formless red plain, Fates. Where are the

mountains? Where are the vast cities?

PLATO: This is such a smaller place than the moon. I could walk from

one edge to its opposite number in minutes, whereas on the moon it

would have required an hour. In the sky the Earth is much smaller than it

was before, and the sun, now further off, is much dimmed.

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DOCTOR: The Fates claim this place is Mars.

PLATO: I would not have thought of the planets as a place in the sky. They appear so small, just points of light like the fixed stars. Yet I can see the reason. If the Earth is so small from here, then so too would this

small island in the cosmos be a small point of light when seen from Greece.

DOCTOR: But what of the people who should live here, Plato? I know the peoples who dwell here. Theirs is a noble civilization, predating man's by millennia. This is not the Mars I have seen flowering in springtime. I do not know this place.

CLOTHO: What of you, Plato? What do you think of this place?

PLATO: Are the other wandering stars places such as this?

LACHESIS: Not all of them. Do you see that one, far to the east?

PLATO: It is bright, almost as a sun itself.

ATROPOS: That is Saturn.

PLATO: Why do you show Saturn to me?

CLOTHO: There we shall find the souls of the departed.

DOCTOR: How can we find the soul of a dead man on Saturn?

ATROPOS: When I cut the thread of life, the soul is drawn back into the heavens and towards its home on Saturn. The light of all souls that dwell there make Saturn luminous.

CLOTHO: Come, Plato, let us find your master Socrates.

PLATO: I have never seen a city the likes of this! No city in Greece or Egypt could be so magical. The people, are they souls of the deceased?

ATROPOS: Many are.

CLOTHO: Others have yet to be born.

DOCTOR: Why do they glow?

LACHESIS: You see the life-energy within the souls, not the souls themselves. The formless souls you see are not yet born. The formed souls are the deceased, and their souls are shaped by the form of the bodies they occupied in life.

PLATO: What of my master, Socrates? Will I recognise him?

ATROPOS: Who is this soul here?

PLATO: Master? Is it you?

SOUL: How have you come here?

PLATO: I sought to prove your final lesson.

SOUL / SOCRATES: On the immortality of the soul?

PLATO: The same.

SOCRATES: Why?

PLATO: Because I have come to understand that logic and reason are not all that defines human existence and the universe. One must gain experience from the world rather than reason alone.

SOCRATES: There may be reason in your words. Shall we discuss them?

PLATO: We shall, master, but can you pardon me for a moment?

SOCRATES: We have all the time in the world.

PLATO: Fates, may I return to the Earth with Socrates's soul?

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CLOTHO: In the fullness of time, perhaps. But not today. His time is

not yet come.

PLATO: Then I would beg your leave to allow me to remain here with

my master for a time so that I might learn from him, and thence return

with his wisdom to a world sorely in need of it.

LACHESIS: We shall permit this. Whether it is one year or five, we

shall allow you the time you require and then return you to your place in

Greece where you shall fulfil your destiny.

PLATO: I thank you, Fates. I must also thank you, Doctor, for coming

so far on this journey.

DOCTOR: You will be happy here?

PLATO: For a time, yes. And you? What shall you do?

DOCTOR: That is in the Fates' hands. May you escape your past,

Plato.

PLATO: May you escape your future, Doctor.

DOCTOR: Fates! Have you more to show me?

CLOTHO: We do, Doctor.

LACHESIS: Do you wish to see it?

ATROPOS: You will want to know.

DOCTOR: Know what?

LACHESIS: What lies beyond the stars, Doctor.

DOCTOR: Beyond the stars?

ATROPOS: Let us stand on the sphere of the stars.

LACHESIS: From here the Earth is merely another light in the sky.

CLOTHO: What lies beneath your feet, Doctor?

DOCTOR: I stand upon a black void. The stars are as spotlights shining into the night.

ATROPOS: Do you wish to see what is on the other side?

DOCTOR: In the geocentric universe the stars are the edge of the universe. By definition there can be nothing beyond. Though I know the Ptolemaic universe is impossible, I cannot deny the evidence of my senses.

CLOTHO: Let us step beyond. Close your eyes, Doctor.

DOCTOR: I feel a breeze, Fates.

LACHESIS: Open your eyes. Look beneath your feet. What do you see?

DOCTOR: I see a surface, formless and grey. But where does the light originate? If we are beyond the universe how can we see?

ATROPOS: Look up, Doctor. Perhaps that will answer your questions.

DOCTOR: And be driven mad by the beings that live beyond the fabric of space and time?

CLOTHO: Do you not trust to your innate curiosity? You must know, Doctor. That is who you are. When you were born I determined your fate,

and that fate was to be curious in all things.

LACHESIS: Do you not trust yourself? Others have always trusted in you, and when I measured out the threads of your life I saw that your lives would end because of the trust others placed in you.

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ATROPOS: Do you not trust to fate? You have seen a future, true, but have you not walked in eternity? You have seen things that may happen in time, but they do not happen today. You have many days still

ahead of you.

DOCTOR: Very well. I shall look into the void beyond the universe. How can this be? Nothing I see is possible!

CLOTHO: What do you see, Doctor?

DOCTOR: I see galaxies and their great spiraled arms. I see comets streaking through the skies. Light comes from everywhere for stars are all about, too numerous to count. I do not understand. Where are we? What are those bubbles I see in the distance?

LACHESIS: They too are worlds, Doctor, taken out of space and shelled within spheres just as Earth is.

DOCTOR: How dare you steal worlds!

CLOTHO: We have not stolen them. We have saved them. You have met many gods in your travels. You met Zeus and the Olympians, Sutekh and the Osirans. The gods warred, Doctor. Worlds were ravaged.

Civilisations fell.

LACHESIS: Worlds threatened were pulled out of space, protected in the spheres from the depredations of the warring gods. The spheres are impenetrable from the outside. Warships could not force the barriers and reach the civilisations within.

ATROPOS: Your vessel penetrated the barrier of this world. We had not anticipated this. If your vessel could enter one of the protected worlds then other vessels might as well. We could not permit you to remain.

DOCTOR: What if I wish to remain?

CLOTHO: You cannot.

LACHESIS: Your presence would draw combatants from Beta Osiris or another god-power.

ATROPOS: Nor can you escape your destiny. Is this not your vessel? Do you not call it a TARDIS?

DOCTOR: How did it come to be here? I wished never to journey in it again.

LACHESIS: We have brought it here.

ATROPOS: Will you not return to your travels? The universe has need of your skills, even if you think otherwise.

DOCTOR: When will Earth return to its proper place in space?

LACHESIS: The war is nearly over. Within a millennium these worlds will be returned to their proper places.

DOCTOR: Then what are you? The Fates? Greek gods? Something else entirely?

ATROPOS: We are what we appear to be.

CLOTHO: Will you take up your key?

LACHESIS: Will you resume your journeys?

DOCTOR: What choice have I?

ATROPOS: The future is not written, Time Lord. You have seen a glimpse of what might be, not a glimpse of what will be.

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DOCTOR: I have seen much in my travels, but nothing as remarkable as this. I will cherish the things you have shown me. Because I knew the universe I could not believe. Because I could not believe I would have abandoned the principles of a lifetime out of fear.

LACHESIS: Do not fear the future. Do not fear the things you cannot see. Be bold, Doctor. The universe has need of beings such as you.

ATROPOS: Know this, Doctor. Your friend Plato will write in time that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. You have examined your life. You have not squandered the cords of your life needlessly. You have been a force for good, Doctor, and I feel remorse every time I must do what my sisters demand of me. I know a day shall come when I must cut your final cord, and I shall weep for a year. Never allow your life to become unexamined.

DOCTOR: I shall not, Fates, and I thank you. The universe is stranger than we can imagine, indeed, and forever will there be new vistas to explore!

Epilogue

John S Drew

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

Lycon leaned back and watched the faces of the four young people. They had not said one word the entire time he told his tale or the tales told by the Doctor. Their expressions were a mix of wonder and awe and some fear.

When he saw they weren't going to chime in with anything to say, he asked, 'So, Judai, what do you think now? Are you ready to lead?'

'Do not mock me, Lycon, please,' Judai said, her voice trembling somewhat. 'You know I am not. But some day I hope to be able to, and to be as strong as my grandfather was.'

Her reply was met with a round of 'Me too,' from the others. Lycon nodded slowly, impressed that he still had the knack of holding an audience captive with his words. Of course, he reminded himself, it wasn't that difficult with the material he had to work with.

'How long was it before the people of Earth stopped believing in magic?' Judai asked.

'Who is to say they still don't?' Lycon replied, shrugging.

'It just seems a shame that a man as great as this Arthur was would be bogged down by such a...' Judai searched for the word. 'ma gimmick.

Everyone knows there is no such thing as magic.'

'Now, wait a moment,' Davad cut in. 'What you call science may seem magic to others.'

'It's just amazing how one person can hold such sway over another individual. Merlin, for one. And look at how the Doctor influenced Theodoric. Do you think his words had as much influence over our grandfather?'

'The King was his own man,' Lycon said. 'He had the wisdom to listen to new concepts, but he ruled with his heart and mind.'

Shaila nodded and changed the subject. 'I liked the story of Henry VIII's court. The ball the Doctor and Nyssa attended sounded delightful.'

'Never mind that,' Kieran said. 'You mentioned influence and I thought it was amazing how much the belief in a supposed higher power could influence how one ruled. Henry VIII's problems with the church were quite interesting. Thank goodness grandfather never had to deal with that.'

'Well, that's something else we've never had to deal with, fortunately. Look at poor Martin Luther and his struggle to have his beliefs recognised. Fortunately, we allow for all such thoughts on Zalezna.'

Davad smiled a moment, thoughtful as he continued. 'The stories of Earth appealed to me most. The Doctor has a great love for this world. We must visit there one time.'

'I'd like that too,' Judai chimed in. 'One thing that struck me was something Orwen Kleth of the Kortani said and he was wrong when he

said it. Words do bring life to people. The Doctor's words did bring life to

our grandfather. They did have an influence.'

'I guess being ruler of Zalezna wouldn't be all that horrible,' Kieran

admitted.

Lycon beamed as he watched the four continue to discuss the tales

he had imparted to them. He was about to dismiss them when a sound

that was familiar and yet alien to Lycon caught his attention. He rose

quickly and left the room.

‘Lycon?' Judai asked, clearly concerned at the man's odd behaviour.

The children rose from their seats and followed after him, keeping a safe

enough distance so as not to interfere.

Lycon's pace quickened as he grew closer to the source of the sound,

which was now reaching a crescendo in volume. He threw open the

doors to the meeting hall and gasped at the sight before him.

'The TARDIS!' he exclaimed as the noise cut out.

The Doctor stepped out of the time machine and looked about the

chamber, a wave of nostalgia washing across his face. He turned and his

smile grew warmer at the sight of Lycon. He approached the old man.

'But,' Lycon spluttered, 'it is you! And you haven't aged a day.'

'Time plays tricks on us all, my old friend,' the Doctor replied. 'The

place hasn't changed much. You took my suggestion to use the lush

green tapestries on the wall, I see. It has a much more calming effect,

which is what you need when your warriors return from battle.'

Lycon laughed. 'That it does, Doctor.'

The Doctor's face changed quickly as he got to the point of his visit. 'I'm not too late, am I?'

Lycon shook his head. 'No, he lives, but barely. Would you like to see him?'

'Please.'

The two turned and stopped at the sight of the audience before them.

'What are you doing here?' Lycon snapped at the children.

The Doctor stepped forward and knelt before the four. 'I do believe I am in the presence of royalty.'

Judai was the first to speak. 'Are you him? Are you the Doctor?'

'Indeed I am,' he replied. 'And you are?'

'Judai,' she said. She introduced her relations in turn. 'Have you come back to save us?'

'Save you?' the Doctor looked surprised.

'By saving our grandfather,' Davad explained.

The Doctor's face clouded. 'I'm afraid that's not possible — at least, for me it isn't.'

'But you saved him once before,' Davad pressed on.

'I helped him once before,' the Doctor replied, looking up at Lycon. 'I think your Wise Man may have embellished my role in all this. Your grandfather is a great man and it was his courage that saved your people.'

'And what shall we do now?' Judai asked. 'How shall we go on

without him?'

'As you did when his father passed, and his father before him,' the Doctor said. 'Life is a continuing circle. It starts and ends in the same place. When your grandfather dies, his eldest son will take the throne. There is a tradition on many worlds that when this happens, one chants,

"The King is dead, long live the King." The cycle continues. Such is life.'

He paused a moment. 'I would like to pay my respects to your grandfather though.'

Judai looked into his eyes a moment and smiled warmly in return.

'Please do.'

The Doctor returned the smile and turned to face Lycon.

'This way, please,' the Wise Man said, gesturing from the room. He looked to the four. 'And you have studies to attend to. The meeting hall is

not the place for you.'

They exited quickly as the Doctor and Lycon made their way to Mihal's chambers.

Lycon could hear the sad sigh that escaped from the Doctor as he entered the dimly lit room. The sigh, it seemed to Lycon, was as much for the Doctor as it was for the dying king. It was clear from the sound that the Doctor had seen more than his fair share of death.

The Doctor walked quietly over to the bed and knelt down before the prone figure. The King's once-lush red hair was matted and white. He wore a grizzled beard that was in desperate need of grooming. His face attested most to the passage of time with the large number of age lines that stretched across the surface.

The Doctor placed a hand gently on the man's wrist a moment before looking over to Lycon. Lycon could tell from the Doctor's expression that it wasn't going to be much longer now.

'Who is that?' Mihal's voice was weak and his breathing was thready, but his eyes were wide open now at the sight before him. Despite his age, there was still a little spark in the eyes of the man he knew so many years ago. 'Can this be? Are my eyes deceiving me?'

'No, old friend, I'm here,' the Doctor said softly.

'I knew you would come,' Mihal said. 'It seems only fitting that you were with me on the day I was born and now you are here on the day I die.' 'Born?' The Doctor looked confused. 'I don't understand.'

Mihal chuckled, developing a fitful cough because of the effort. 'Until that day so many years ago, I wasn't really alive. I thought I was. I thought I knew everything, that I wasn't meant to rule. You helped open my eyes, Doctor. I truly came alive that day. And I've lived my life to the fullest ever since.'

'I'm sure you've done a wonderful job,' the Doctor said.

'Please, take some time to get to know my world before you move on, as you always do.' Mihal's hand slipped away from the Doctor's and he let out a long breath. He closed his eyes a moment and swallowed.

'There isn't much time.'

'No,' the Doctor said simply.

'I'm not afraid,' Mihal said, adding, 'this time. I have much to be proud of and I know the Kingdom is in good hands. My children, they know the stories.'

'And now the grandchildren know them,' Lycon said.

Mihal nodded. 'Good, good. Then I can go.' He tilted his head slightly. 'It was good seeing you again, Doctor.'

'And you, Your Majesty.'

The Doctor rose and moved away from the bed.

'Please ask the grandchildren to attend me, Lycon,' Mihal commanded. 'At once, sire,' he replied.

The two stepped out of the room.

'If you will excuse me a moment,' Lycon said, 'I must tend to the King's request.'

'Of course,' the Doctor said. 'I'll just be over here by the window.'

'The city, yes,' Lycon smiled. He felt a swell of pride as he looked out the window at the spiralling towers that reached into the sky beyond. 'I

think you will find it most impressive.'

Lycon could feel the eyes of the alien looking at him as he walked away. He knew himself that he had aged a great deal since they last met. His gait was much slower now and there was a slight stoop to his posture. Despite the obvious reminder of their youth standing by the window, he couldn't help but feel positive about what lay ahead for the future. Mihal was right. The Kingdom was in good hands.

About the Authors

KATHLEEN O DAVID has had a number of career paths over the years.

She's done just about everything from cancer research to rock and roll. Some of her favourite jobs have been in puppetry, theatre and publishing. She is a former associate editor with Del Rey Books, where she helped edit the *Star Wars* line, fiction and non-fiction. With her husband, Peter David, she adapted the first four issues of the Japanese manga *Negima* for Del Rey. Her appreciation for *Doctor Who* started at a young age with Tom Baker and has never diminished. Drop in and say 'hi' at kathodavid.malibulist.com.

On a Pedestal by Kathleen O David takes place between The Ice Warriors and The Enemy of the World

PETER DAVID has had over seventy novels published, including *Sir*

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One Fateful Knight by Peter David takes place after the TV movie.

KEITH R A DeCANDIDO (editor) is the author of more than thirty

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Anthology of Long Short Fiction, and several *Star Trek* collections. His other *Doctor Who* work includes the short stories *UNITed We Fall* (in *Decalog 3: Consequences*) and *Life from Lifelessness* (in *Short Trips: Destination Prague*). Find out less at his website at DeCandido.net.

LINNEA DODSON is a technical writer, book critic, long-time fan of *Doctor Who* and the ‘Whoniverse' reporter for Firefox News. *God Send Me Well to Keep* is her first fiction commission and she is thrilled to be paid for writing something that does not involve a chapter on troubleshooting or the words 'in order to... click the...'

God Send Me Well to Keep by Linnea Dodson takes place between Time-Flight and Arc of Infinity.

JOHN S DREW has been a librarian's aide, a bartender and a doorman.

He is currently trying to teach the youth of America how to spell 'knife'

with a 'k'. When he's not doing that or making the best chicken-and-

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dishes east of the Mississippi, he likes to write stories he hopes

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The Revolutionaries in *The History of Christmas*. He's also written prose

in the Spider-Man and *Star Trek* universes. In addition, he has written a

number of audio dramas including *Meltdown, The Old Curiosity Shop,*

The Justin Case Mysteries, and *The Dome*. To learn more than you

might care to about this man and to sample his audio work, check out his

website at www.drewshi.com.

From Little Acorns... and Epilogue by John S Drew take place after the

TV movie.

DIANE DUANE is this year celebrating her twenty-ninth year of getting

paid for writing. Besides devising various universes of her own (such as

the Middle Kingdoms of her *Door Into...* fantasy novels and the wizardly

world of the award-winning *Young Wizards YA* fantasy series), she

frequently steps into other people's worlds to work and/or play. She has

written on-screen and off for characters as diverse as Batman and

Barbie, Spider- Man, Siegfried the Volsung and Scooby-Doo. She also

holds the peculiar distinction of having written for Star Trek in more

different formats than anyone else alive. But the opportunity to work

with

the Doctor has caused even DD's patient and long-suffering family to ask

her to quit it with the bragging already. She lives in County Wicklow,

Ireland, with her husband, fellow screenwriter/novelist Peter Morwood,

three cats, four sometimes dysfunctional computers and more than five

hundred cookbooks.

Goths and Robbers by Diane Duane takes place between Arc of Infinity

and Snakedance.

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At times, **ALLYN GIBSON** wished he had paid more attention in his

college philosophy classes, but he more than made up for the lack in

writing *The Spindle of Necessity*. Now that the story is done, he intends

never to read another philosophical text. He resides in Baltimore,

Maryland where he writes for a trade catalogue, pens fiction (such as the

critically-acclaimed *Star Trek* short story *Make-Believe*), and roots long-

distance for the long- suffering Chicago Cubs. He would like to thank to

Lisa Sullivan and Glenn Hauman for being sounding boards when

Spindle was merely a mad idea.

The Spindle of Necessity by Allyn Gibson takes place between The Trial

of a Time Lord and Time and the Rani.

ROBERT T JESCHONEK has written fantasy and science fiction stories

for *Postscripts, Abyss 8: Apex, Darker Matter*, and other magazines and websites. His *Star Trek* fiction has appeared in the anthologies *New Frontier: No Limits, Voyager: Distant Shores*, and *Strange New Worlds Volumes III, V, and VI*, and he also wrote the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* eBook *The Cleanup*. His story *Our Million-Year Mission* won the grand prize in *Strange New Worlds VI*. Robert has worked in radio, television and public relations and currently works as a technical writer for a defence contractor

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Rock Star by Robert T Jeschonek takes place between Carnival of Monsters and Frontier in Space.

UNA McCORMACK is the author of two *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novels: *Cardassia: The Lotus Flower* and *Hollow Men*, published by Pocket Books. Her short fiction, original and tie-in, has appeared in various places, including *Glorifying Terrorism* (edited by Farah Mendlesohn), *Doctor Who Magazine*, and *Foundation: the International*

Review of Science Fiction. When not writing, she teaches organisational theory at the University of Cambridge.

The Slave War by Una McCormack takes place between The Macro Terror and The Faceless Ones.

TERRI OSBORNE is the author of several *Star Trek* short stories and eBooks, from the critically acclaimed *Three Sides to Every Story* in the *Deep Space Nine* anthology *Prophecy and Change* in 2003 to the two-part *Corps of Engineers/The Next Generation* eBook crossover *Remembrance of Things Past* in 2007, as well as stories in *Voyager: Distant Shores* and *New Frontier: No Limits*; the landmark 50th eBook in the *S.C.E.* series (*Malctorum*); the first of the *S.C.E.: What's Past* miniseries (*Progress*); and one of the eBooks in the six-part *TNG*

miniseries *Slings and Arrows*, entitled *That Sleep of Death*. Terri is working on several other projects that will take her to the Ireland of the past, the Mars of the future, and other places both near and far. Find out more at her website at www.terriosborne.com.

Good Queen, Bad Queen, I Queen, You Queen by Terri Osborne takes place between The Armageddon Factor and Destiny of the Daleks.

STEVEN SAVILE has edited a number of critically acclaimed anthologies and collections, including *Redbrick Eden* and, most

recently,

Elemental for Tor Books in the US and *Smoke Ghost & Other*

Apparitions and *Black Gondolier and Other Stories*, the collected horror

stories of Fritz Leiber. Steven is the author of the Von Carstein Vampire

trilogy, *Inheritance, Dominion* and *Retribution*, set in Games Workshop's

Warhammer world, and has re-imagined the bloodthirsty celtic barbarian

Slaine from *2000 AD* in a new trilogy of novels for Black Flame. Steven

has written for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as well as his own novels

and short stories, including *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos) and *Angel*

Road (Elastic Press). He was a runner-up in the British Fantasy Awards,

and the 2002 winner of a Writers of the Future Award.

Peaceable Kingdom by Steven Savile takes place between Survival and

the TV movie.

JAMES SWALLOW is a novelist and scriptwriter, creator of the

Sundowners series of steampunk westerns and the only British writer to

have worked on a *Star Trek* television series. His credits include

Peacemaker, a novel featuring the Tenth Doctor and Martha Jones, the

Doctor Who audio dramas *Singularity* and *Old Soldiers*, the *2000 AD*

plays *Dreddline, Jihad* and *Grud is Dead, Space 1889: The Steppes of*

Thoth and *Blake's 7: The Audio Adventures*, as well as novels from the

worlds of *Star Trek, Warhammer 40,000* and *Stargate*. His short fiction

appears in the *Short Trips* collections *Dalek Empire, Destination Prague*, and *Snapshots*, and the Bernice Summerfield anthologies *Something Changed* and *Collected Works*.

Clean-up on Aisle Two by James Swallow takes place between Survival and the TV movie.

This is **RICHARD C WHITE's** first *Doctor Who* work, but he is no stranger to working in other times and worlds. He wrote *Redshift* for the 2007 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* anthology *The Sky's the Limit* as well as the eBook *Echoes of Coventry*, released in 2006 as a part of the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* series. Other works include the novel *Gauntlet: Dark Legacy: Paths of Evil* (ibooks, inc.), which became one of their best-selling tie-in titles for 2004. In addition, he contributed to *The Ultimate Hulk* (Boulevard Books) in 1998, co-writing *Assault on Avengers*

Mansion with Steven A. Roman. After graduating from the University of Central Missouri in 1982 with a degree in Medieval History, Rich spent fifteen years in the army as an analyst, a linguist and a cryptanalyst. He now works as a tech writer in the wilds of corporate America. He greatly appreciates the support of his very patient wife Joni and daughter Katie.

His four cats are reasonably supportive, as long as this writing stuff

doesn't get in the way of their feeding times.

The Price of Conviction by Richard C White takes place prior to An Unearthly Child.

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